Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Vietnam: The Impact of Autonomy Policy

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ABSTRACT
The autonomous university model is recognized as a method of advanced university governance to improve training quality. In Vietnam, university autonomy has made many positive changes in training quality in recent years. This study examines if there is a difference in the QA activities of academic programs between two types of higher education institutions: the public universities with financial autonomy and the public universities without financial autonomy. A quantitative method was used to analyze the survey data from 593 participants. An independent T-test was used to analyze the differences between the two types of institutions. The results indicated statistical differences in most activities in seven research areas. The quantitative result provided strong evidence of the impact of autonomy policy on two types of higher education institutions, which was not addressed in the national report on autonomy policy in 2022. Some recommendations were made to improve the QA activities toward continuous quality improvement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the autonomous university model is recognized as a method of advanced university governance to improve training quality. In Vietnam, university autonomy has made many positive changes in the quality of training in recent years. These changes stem from the development trends in higher education and have been promoted by the guidelines and policies of Vietnam's Communist Party and State.

The Government issued Decree No. 97/CP dated December 10, 1993, on the establishment of Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-HN) and Decree No. 16/CP dated January 27, 1995, on the establishment of Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM). The two national universities are models of considerable autonomy that comply with the Government's regulations, subject to the state management of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), other ministries and branches according to their professional fields, and the People's Committee of the city where the National University is located, and within the scope of functions as prescribed by the Government and the law.

Autonomy continues to be stipulated in the Vietnam education laws of 1998, 2005, and 2012. The 2012 law specifically addressed higher education autonomy in Article 32: "Higher education institutions are autonomous in their main activities in the fields of organization and personnel, finance and property, training, science and technology, international cooperation, quality assurance (QA) of higher education." Higher education institutions exercise a higher degree of autonomy in accordance with their capacity, ranking results, and educational quality accreditation results. Beginning with the law of 2012, QA is addressed in light of the autonomy policy.

In 2015, 23 public higher education institutions submitted to the Prime Minister their approved plan for piloting the autonomy mechanism. The plan included a commitment to self-financing the operating expenses for recurrent and investment expenditures, as well as full self-responsibility for training and scientific research; organizational structure and personnel; finance; scholarship and tuition policy; and investment and expenditure of regularly institutional activities. Higher education institutions (HEIs) that were piloting autonomy according to Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP for the period 2014-2017 achieved some encouraging results, such as reducing administrative procedures in submitting dossiers and schemes to state management agencies for review and approval; increasing initiative and flexibility within the university organization; and implementing activities. The pilot model of autonomy was initially evaluated positively by the MOET (MOET, 2022). The universities have achieved specific achievements with higher revenues, better teaching quality, and more autonomy to make internal decisions and have received positive recognition from society.

In order to implement the policy effectively the Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP, the National Assemblypromulgated Law No. 34/2018/QH14 dated November 19, 2018 to amend and supplement a number of articles of Decree No 34. Therefore, Law on Higher Education No. 34 was an important legal basis to enable higher education institutions in the country to exercise greater autonomy. At the same time, autonomy of HEIs must be monitored and held accountable to stakeholders and society. A March 2022 survey with the Chairmen, the Boards of Directors, the Secretaries of the Party Committee, and Rectors of some HEIs indicated that the autonomy policy had a positive impact on university organization, personnel, finances and assets, and academic and professional autonomy (MOET, 2022).

To examine the implementation and impact of autonomy in Vietnamese HEIs, several research studies have been conducted. From the first day of the pilot autonomy, Dao (2014) pointed out that autonomy in academic affairs was limited. The university was allowed to award degrees from blank certificates purchased from MOET. Yet, the university could not deliver a program without MOET's approval. In addition to academic affairs, Dao (2014) indicated that university staff had little impact on the appointment of senior managers. Another area of focus in autonomy research in Vietnam is finance. Pham (2012) argued that autonomy resulted in the university initiating fee generation through onsite and in-service training, with limited oversight by the MOET. As a result of higher fees, some universities lowered their admission requirements to boost the number of student enrolment, and this became a common practice to increase the university's revenue (Nguyen, 2016). In contrast, Vo and Laking (2019) examined autonomy practices among selected public universities in Vietnam, and the results indicated that the autonomy of public universities resulted in higher tuition fees. Therefore, more and more students could not afford higher education, which reduced student enrollment.

One objective of autonomy policy was to increase decentralization in decision-making to the institutional level and to increase the system's efficiency. However, Vo and Laking (2019) found that university resources were misused for individual purposes rather than for improving the quality of education. Tran (2014) suggested that Vietnam might not be ready for decentralization because the lower-level administrators were not competent enough to take on this change, and the central ministry did not have appropriate policies to effectively manage control over the outcomes. Concerning the challenges in the implementation, Mai et al. (2020) reviewed autonomy models applied in different countries and proposed some suggestions for the issues of organization, finance, personnel management, and academic affairs for Vietnamese HEIs and the government.

A review of the literature showed that multiple research studies had been conducted on the challenges in the autonomy policies implementation process as well as the positive and negative impacts of autonomy on all aspects of the university's governance and management. However, no research was found addressing the effects of the autonomy policy on the QA of academic programs in Vietnamese HEIs. The research presented in this paper aims to answer the question, ***"Is there a difference in the QA activities of academic programs between two types of higher education institutions: public universities with financial autonomy and public universities without financial autonomy?"***

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Major Autonomy Policies for Vietnamese HEIs

The Vietnamese government has issued three major policies related to university autonomy: 2003 University Charter, Law No. 34/2018/QH14, and Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP. The issue of university autonomy in Vietnam is clearly stated in the 2003 University Charter (Article 10): "Universities have the right of autonomy and self-responsibility in accordance with the law on the school development planning, organization of training activities, science, technology, finance, international relations, organization and personnel"; and in the 2005 Education Law: "The university is entitled with autonomy and self-responsibility in accordance with the law and the school's charter." Specific regulations on the financial autonomy of universities are clearly stated in the Decree No. 43/2006/ND-CP dated April 25, 2006. The Law on Higher Education 2012 specifically stipulates conditions for higher education institutions when exercising autonomy at a higher level in accordance with their capacity, ranking results, and results of higher education quality accreditation.

Subsequently, Law No. 34/2018/QH14 (Article 4), Decree No. 99/2019/ND-CP clearly define autonomy as follows: "HEIs have the right to define their own goals; make their own decisions and take responsibility for their professional development, academic affairs, organizational personnel, finance, property and other activities on the basis of law and their capacities." (Clause 11, Article 4). The Higher Education Law 2012 includes regulations on using accreditation results as a basis for HEIs to exercise their autonomy [14]. Law 34/2018/QH14 stipulates that accreditation is compulsory for HEIs and training programs as one of four conditions to achieve autonomy. HEIs need to decentralize autonomy and accountability to each unit and individual in the HEI and publicize accreditation conditions, accreditation results, student employment rates, and other information as prescribed by the law (Article 32).

In addition, the autonomy for HEIs, which has been also reflected in many guidelines and policies of the Communist Party and State on university autonomy, has encouraged HEIs to promote their autonomy, develop academic programs, develop science and technology, attract high-quality human resources, and innovate management methods to attract external resources to improve the quality of education effectively. In addition, a number of regulations also directly addressed the autonomy of HEIs, such as Decree No. 16/2015/ND-CP dated February 14, 2015, on regulations on the autonomous operations of public non-business units. Decree 60/2021/ND-CP dated June 21, 2021, regulates the financial autonomous operations of public non-business units.

In particular, Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP dated October 24, 2014, pilots new operating procedures for public HEIs in the period 2014-2017 in five areas: training and scientific research; organizational structure and personnel; finance; scholarship and tuition policy for policy beneficiaries; and investment and procurement. Twenty-three HEIs were allowed to pilot the renewed autonomy operations. The experiences of the piloting HEIs, in the context of the market economy and extensive international integration during the 4th Industrial Revolution, are beneficial to other HEIs as they attempt to innovate management, improve the quality of training, scientific research and services and help to increase dynamism, boost competition among universities and enhance accountability to different stakeholders. Successful implementation of university autonomy requires HEIs to have the capacity to strategically plan, implement, and ensure that objectives are being fulfilled, especially the QA conditions for HEIs.

In August 2022, MOET published a report on the results of the autonomy policy for 141 out of 232 HEIs in the country. The report indicated that three main reasons for ineligibility for autonomy were: (1) No recognition of institutional accreditation, accounting for 18.53%; (2) No establishment of a University Board, accounting for 7.5%; and (3) Insufficient documents and regulations meeting the policy requirements. Of the 23 HEIs piloting for autonomy under Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP, 03 HEIs are not eligible for autonomy in the light of the current Higher Education Law. In fact, although the universities have submitted the proposals for the establishment of a university board, the requirements have not yet been approved by MOET.

2.2. Policies on QA of Academic Programs in Vietnam

In 2013, the government issued a legal framework to improve the quality and effectiveness of education in general and of human resources training in higher education in particular. On the essential and comprehensive reform of higher education in Vietnam, it is stated that "Based on the general objectives of higher education innovation, it is necessary to provide accountable information about program objectives, program learning outcomes (PLOs), course learning outcomes (CLOs), program curriculum, majors and disciplines. Stakeholders use these criteria for QA for the whole system and HEIs as a foundation to monitor and evaluate the quality of education." (Resolution 29-

NQ/TW, 2013). On April 16th, 2015, MOET stipulates the minimum knowledge and competence that learners are expected to obtain upon graduating from each level of higher education and the procedures for the establishment, appraisal, and issuance of academic programs for undergraduate level, master's level and doctorate level that "PLOs are minimum requirements of the knowledge, skills, attitude and professional responsibilities obtained by learners after completing an academic program, committed by HEIs to learners and the society and publicly informed along with conditions for completion."

On October 18th, 2016, the Prime Minister signed Decision No. 1982/QĐ-TTg to issue the Vietnamese Qualifications Framework (VQF) with the targets somewhat similar to those of other countries in the world, such as making the qualification framework easier to understand and more cohesive by connecting various parts; improving the quality of inter-college programs for academic training and vocational training by showing and enhancing vertical and horizontal connections in the current system; supporting the development of lifelong learning by providing PLOs which allow learners to choose a program; broadening the recognition of study achievements; enhancing the connection and consistency between academic training and vocational training with the labor market; building a foundation for training cooperation in a broad range with foreign partners; providing references to ensure quality. This framework consists of eight levels. Each level describes what graduates are required to obtain in terms of knowledge, skills, autonomy, and responsibility.

In 2017, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 622/QĐ-TTg to promulgate the National Action Plan for the implementation of the 2030 sustainable development agenda with a view that the "human is the core for sustainable education development." Specifically, the education sector's responsibility was to "ensure that education is of high quality, fair, comprehensive and promotes chances for lifelong learning." To achieve the targets for sustainable development, by 2030, the quality of HEIs must be improved in response to the needs of the labor market; the higher education system must be effective and in line with the requirements of regional and global higher education development, and all learners must be equipped with necessary knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development.

In 2018, the Government revised Higher Education Law of 2018 and determined one of the goals for higher education was to provide learners with the required knowledge, professional skills, and competences for researching and applying science and technology adequately to the level of education they were trained. MOET stated that HEIs needed to determine and publicly share PLOs as a foundation to improve their programs and the quality of human resources to meet society's needs. On January 15, 2019, the Prime Minister signed Decision No. 69/QĐ-TTG on "Improving the quality of higher education for the period 2019-2025". The decision stated that the general target of Scheme 69 was to create a fundamental transformation in the quality of training, scientific research, and technology transfer within the higher education system to meet the demand of human resources; contributing to the improvement in labor quality and productivity, promoting creative startups, and increasing the nation's competitiveness in the region and the world. Seven groups of tasks and solutions in the Scheme were: promoting self-operation and reform in higher education with an effective management and monitoring system; reinforcing conditions to assure quality and enhance higher education quality accreditation; reforming training management, programs and methods; promoting scientific research, technology transfer, and community services; promoting the internationalization of higher education; developing and implementing an information system to analyze and predict the demand and the supply of skilled human resources; developing policies and mechanisms that create resources, motivation and a healthy environment for competition in higher education development.

2.3. Research about QA of Academic Programs in Vietnam's Higher Education

Since accreditation is one of the four conditions requisite to being eligible for autonomy, much research on the experience of improving the QA of academic programs has been conducted. The first research approach is on aligning program outcomes with the Vietnam Qualification Framework, a legal document to ensure consistent outcomes across universities in the country. The advantages of integrating educational philosophy, 21st-century skills, and a national qualifications framework into training programs include (1) Access to self-assessment requirements and guidance according to Asian University Network- Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) Standards; (2) Determination to innovate and improve the curriculum as well as the teaching and testing activities of the university and its departments; (3) Development of a curriculum map showing explicit social compatibility as required by governing bodies; (4) Opportunities to exchange experience among departments within the university through the QA teams as well as with other colleges in the university; and (5) Active support and timely actions of

leaders at all levels (Le, 2020; Q. C. Nguyen et al., 2020; Vo, 2020). However, there have been many difficulties and limitations that the universities and their departments must overcome to grow continuously (Tran et al., 2018). Confusion occurs in choosing concise, relevant core values of educational philosophies that fully cover expectations and articulate educational philosophies. Determining the compatibility between the educational philosophy/core values of the faculty and the university requires a deep understanding and competence in pedagogical design and basic knowledge of pedagogy without having to assume responsibility for the teaching and learning process; Educational philosophies are sometimes not popularized or explained to stakeholders, especially teachers and learners so they can understand and implement these philosophies in teaching, learning and research. Implementing training programs in accordance with the spirit of the educational philosophy and requirements of 21st-century skills, and the requirements of VQF standards necessitate appropriate investment in resources and facilities that the university could not fully meet, even with high-quality academic programs.

The second research approach examines the implementation experience of conducting QA for the whole institution (Trinh, 2020). ISO 9000:2015 is one of the major frameworks used by some public financial autonomous universities. This approach's advantage is having a central system to manage all the activities across the universities. However, because there were some differences in each department within the colleges, the same procedure with little flexibility might cause some challenges in the implementation process.

The third approach is the integration of technology into the QA process. Cao (2020) and Nguyen (2020) discussed using technology to improve the self-study process and make it simpler and faster for internal stakeholders to engage in QA activities. Nguyen (2020) proposed a technology solution that links quality assurance across offices to facilitate data collection and analysis in the QA reporting process and, most importantly, to provide sound evidence for administrators' decision-making. To have a consistent and synchronized internal quality assurance (IQA) system, a university in the South was building institutional management software to manage the database closely and in a highly systematic manner, evaluate the training programs periodically and develop a project to improve the quality of education and training. The quality of IQA supported the analysis of data from stakeholders, then the QA office built tools or standards for the institution's staff and faculty members to conduct internal peer review. If the internal QA were good, it would facilitate the accreditation process. A quality monitoring system involving the Chairman of the School Council, Board of Directors, QA Unit, faculties, and administrative departments would help the university to improve quality, promote strengths and overcome weaknesses, then adjust the school's mission, vision, and strategic plan.

Numerous research studies concern the impact of autonomy policy on university governance and on the challenges to and best practices for implementing QA activities at various universities. However, there is almost no research in the field differentiating the QA at the public, financially autonomous universities, and public, state-funded universities. This study aims to determine if there are differences between two types of Vietnamese HEIs, the public universities with financial autonomy and the public universities without financial autonomy, in their QA activities.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Participants

A survey was sent using Google Forms to Vietnamese universities across three main regions in Vietnam (the North, the Middle, and the South). A statement of informed consent was included in the first question of the online survey, describing how the responses would be de-identified, stored, and secured. The participants received emails and two reminders every two weeks to increase the response rate. After one month, the researchers received 601 responses, but some were incomplete. The missing responses were less than 5%. Therefore, the researchers decided to exclude them from the data collection. The total number of responses to the survey was 593. The participants in the survey included researchers, faculty members, students, and administrators. Table 1 displays the participant demographics.

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Participants

	N	%
Role		
Researchers	141	23.8

Faculty members	178	30.0
Students	135	22.8
Administrators	137	23.1
Source of Funding		
Public with financial autonomy	394	66.4
Public without financial autonomy	165	27.8
Private and profit	16	2.7

3.2. Survey Instrument

This study used a quantitative approach, with a survey being the data collection tool. The survey adapted some items from the 2017 National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Provost Survey. The researchers contacted the NILOA administrators and received permission to use and modify the survey items for research purposes. The researchers chose the statements that were relevant to the research topic and translated into Vietnamese and peer-reviewed for accurate translation. A four-point Likert scale was utilized for participants' responses to the overarching question, "To what extent do you think your institution is doing the following." The survey included seven subsections related to QA activities. The reliability of all items in the survey was checked, and the overall Cronbach alpha was .912. The researchers also checked the reliability of seven subsections. The Cronbach alpha was .9122 for factors impacting the QA, $r=0.956$ for supporting activities to QA, $r=0.954$ for QA activities, $r=0.966$ for the use of QA results for improvement, $r=0.956$ for transparency in QA results to stakeholders, $r=0.976$ for strategies to engage faculty in QA activities and $r=0.965$ for policies to engage faculties in QA of academic programs.

To analyze the differences between two types of institutions: the public universities with financial autonomy and the public universities without financial autonomy, an independent T-test was the primary measure to analyze the data. This study had one independent variable (source of funding) with two levels (public with financial autonomy and pubic without financial autonomy) and seven dependent variables (factors impacting the QA, supporting activities to QA, QA activities, the use of quality assurance results for improvement, transparency in QA results to stakeholders, strategies to engage faculty in QA activities and policies to engage faculty in QA of academic programs).

To answer the research question, there are seven hypothesis:

H1: There is a difference in *factors impacting the QA activities* between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

H2: There is a difference in *supporting activities to QA* between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

H3: There is a difference in *QA activities* between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

H4: There is a difference in *the use of QA results for improvement* between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

H5: There is a difference in *transparency in QA results provided to stakeholders* between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

H6: There is a difference in *strategies to engage faculty in QA activities* between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

H7: There is a difference in *policies to engage faculty in QA of academic programs* between the public universities with financial autonomy and the public without financial autonomy.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

H1: There is a difference in factors impacting the QA activities between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

A Welch t-test was run to determine if there were differences in factors prompting the institution to conduct quality assurance activities between public financial autonomy and public state-funded, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p=0.005). The results indicated a significant difference in faculty or staff interest in improving student learning (t= 2.649, p=0.001), national calls for accountability and/or transparency (t= 2.252, p=0.001).

H2: There is a difference in supporting activities to QA between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

A Welch t-test was run to determine if there were differences in supporting activities to QA between public financial autonomy and public state- funded, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p=0.005). The results indicated a significant difference in institutional policies/statements related to QA activities (t=3.075, p=0.021), QA committee (t=3.345,p=0.005), QA unit/offices (t=3.075, p=0.021), professional development opportunities for faculty and staff (t=3.581, p=0.000), active involvement of significant numbers of faculty in QA (t=3.674,p=0.000), active involvement of student affairs staff in QA (t=6.616, p=0.053), active involvement of students in QA (t=35.922, p=0.000), QA management system or software (t=2.826, p=0.001), and leadership from President/CEO or Provost (t=1.725, p=0.003).

H3: There is a difference in QA activities between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

A Welch t-test was run to determine if there were differences in QA activities between public financial autonomy and public state-funded, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p=0.005). The results indicated a significant difference in updating course learning outcomes (t=3.133, p=0.024), updating program learning outcomes (t=2.148, p=0.032), updating course syllabus (t=2.710, p=0.007), updating course teaching methodology (t=3.939, p=0.000), updating the assessment measures (t=3.014, p=0.003), using the outcomes assessment results for course improvement (t=4.704, p=0.017), using the outcomes assessment results for program improvement (t=3.1701, p=0.011), and using the survey assessment results for program improvement (t=4.321, p=0.048).

H4: There is a difference in the use of QA results for improvement between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

A Welch t-test was run to determine if there were differences in the use of QA results for improvement between public financial autonomy and public state-funded, as assessed by 'Levene's test for equality of variances (p=0.005). The results indicated a significant difference in providing information to the accreditation agency (t=2.788, p=0.011); sharing QA results with stakeholders such as potential students, alumni, and employers (t=4.804, p=0.000); making QA results transparent to the board of regents, institution's committee and state management agencies (t=3.414, p=0.002); benchmarking quality assurance results within the institution (t=4.322, p=0.000); doing strategic planning to the institution (t=3.649, p=0.001); updating/revising program learning outcomes (t=2.215, p=0.027); updating the teaching methodology to improve the program learning outcomes (t=3.906, p=0.000); updating the assessment measures to improve the program learning outcomes (t=3.422, p=0.001); improving student support services. (t=2.552, p=0.011); updating policies relating to academic programs (t=3.429, p=0.001); and allocating resources to ensure the quality of academic programs (t=5.030, p=0.000).

H5: There is a difference in transparency in QA results provided to stakeholders between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

A Welch t-test was run to determine if there were differences in transparency in QA results provided to stakeholders between public financial autonomy and public state-funded, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p=0.005). The results indicated a significant difference in program learning outcomes (t=2.486, p=0.013), implementation of program QA (t=3.816, p=0.018), student support services to QA of the academic program (t=4.601, p=0.000), activities of QA of academic programs (t=3.252, p=0.001), results of program learning outcomes (t=4.613, p=0.000), improvement based on the results of program learning outcomes (t=4.614, p=0.000), learners' value-added in the academic program (t=4.588, p=0.000).

H6: There is a difference in strategies to engage faculty in QA activities between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

A Welch t-test was run to determine if there were differences in strategies to engage faculty in QA activities between public financial autonomy and public state-funded, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p=0.005). The results indicated a significant difference in recognition/rewards on engagement of QA from leaders/deans/chairs (t=5.112, p=0.000)1; financial support to attend quality QA annual professional development (t=2.851, p=0.005) and a teaching/co-teaching QA workshop for new faculty members (t=4.490, p=0.000); allocating resources to support QA activities (t=4.119, p=0.000); teaching release time for QA participation (t=3.274, p=0.001); participating in QA seminars with other faculties (t=2.982, p=0.003); emphasizing the importance of QA activities by leaders and the QA office (t=2.372, p=0.018); funding for QA research that supports the use of QA results to make improvement to academic programs (t=3.339, p=0.001); participating in QA seminars (t=3.319, p=0.001); integrating QA activities in the faculty's regular workload to avoid an extra burden (t=3.369, p=0.001); assigning program directors and program coordinators to engage in QA activities (t=4.738, p=0.000); participanting in a QA committee to implement QA activities in the institution (t=4.346, p=0.000); and participating in the annual assessment of QA activities (t=4.004, p=0.000).

H7: There is a difference in policies to engage faculty in QA of academic programs between the public universities with financial autonomy and those without financial autonomy.

A Welch t-test was run to determine if there were differences in policies to engage faculty in QA of academic programs between public financial autonomy and public state-funded, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p=0.005). The results indicated a significant difference in the requirement of state management on faculty engagement in QA activities (t=3.501, p=0.001), the inclusion of QA in faculty job description/faculty responsibilities (t=4.001, p=0.001), periodical resource allocation to QA activities (t=2.528, p=0.012), embedding the assessment of QA activities in annual rewards (t=3.159, p=0.002), rewards for excellence in QA participation (t=3.692, p=0.000), use of QA results in annual resource allocation for continuous quality improvement of academic programs. (t=2.601, p=0.010), and priority of faculties' research on the use of QA (t=2.935, p=0.008).

4.2. Discussion

QA of academic programs plays a significant role in an HEI. Similar to international experiences with quality assurance (Ewel, 2009), external drivers such as institutional and programmatic accreditation and statewide governing or coordinating board mandates have impacted the implementation of quality assurance across universities in Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese HEIs have been under the same pressures, the public universities with financial autonomy in this study scored statistically higher than those without financial autonomy in the quality assurance of academic programs. QA of academic programs has been mentioned in Vietnam's national quality assurance plan; however, no specific national funding has been provided to support the effective implementation of this activity. Also, the policy on transparency at this point merely addresses the transparency of financial information about academic programs and a limited transparency requirement regarding quality in teaching, such as student outcomes, graduation rates, retention rates, employability rates, etc. Results on the external drivers on quality assurance activities indicated no statistical difference in university board and president's commitment to continuous quality improvement. This can conclude that both two types of universities might have committed differently on resources to implement the IQA activities but the two types of universities did not consider differently the use of IQA activities for quality improvement. Also, although the two types of universities differed statistically in some IQA areas, they had to follow the same MOET's requirements and policies. Therefore, there is no statistical difference in this item.

As a result of external drivers from higher education policies on quality assurance and the requirements for accreditation, most institutions set up a system to support the QA of academic programs. Of all the ten activities supporting QA in this study, the mean scored more than 4 out of 5 on the Likert scale. For all ten activities supporting QA, there were statistical differences between the two types of HEIs examined--public universities with financial autonomy and public universities without financial autonomy. A common infrastructure needs to be established within the institutional policies/statements to support QA implementation, including a committee and a quality assurance unit (Linse, 2017). In addition, some good practices in QA, such as professional development for faculties and staff (Evans, 2017) and stakeholders' engagement (e.g., leaders, faculty, students, alumni, and employer) (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2014), were embedded in the implementation. To facilitate the implementation process, some institutions use a QA management system to collect and document data across the HEI to provide evidence for management bodies and accreditation agencies (Ewell, 2009). Noticeably, of the ten activities supporting IQA

activities, there was no statistical difference in QA staff/directors commitment in IQA of academic programs. Further research can address this area to figure out any intrinsic and external motivation for this group of human resources.

QA of academic programs is the core of quality management in most HEIs. It drives the quality assurance of other supporting units such as administrative, student affairs, student support services, and co-curricular activities. QA of academic programs in Vietnamese HEIs follows the steps in Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) (AUN, 2016). This framework is similar to the assessment cycle (Suskie, 2009), beginning with stating the program learning outcomes, addressing the course learning outcomes with program learning outcomes in the curriculum map, choosing appropriate assessment measures to evaluate the achievement of program learning outcomes, and collecting and analyzing the assessment results to make continuous QA. Both frameworks (PDCA and assessment cycle) emphasize the importance of the last step: using the assessment results to make improvements. The results from the survey in this study indicated a statistical difference in most variables in quality assurance activities of academic programs. The mean of this section is more than four of five on the Likert scale. The academic programs used the assessment results to update the program and course learning outcomes, revise the pedagogy and assessment measures and apply the assessment results to improve the courses and programs. These are best practices in the QA of academic programs (Rodgers et al., 2012; Meredith, 2013).

The most important step in QA is the use of QA results for improvement. The QA activities are to improve the quality of the curriculum, teaching, and learning at the HEIs. Transparency supports QA by facilitating the development and implementation of changes. In this study, the results indicated statistical differences in 11 activities for the use of QA between state-funded and financial autonomy institutions. It might be inferred that the institutions with financial autonomy were under more tremendous pressure to provide more transparent information to diverse stakeholders; they had a more intrinsic motivation to implement the use of QA results consistently across the institutions. The common practice of using QA to make improvements helps to communicate evidence of student learning to external stakeholders (e.g., accreditors (Pham, 2021) and quality management bodies) or internal stakeholders (e.g., curriculum committees), develop internal benchmarking and determine resource allocations (Guetterman & Mitchell, 2015). Also, the QA results are used to improve student learning in academic programs, student support services, or institutional policies. Data analysis indicated no statistical difference in using IQA results to update the course syllabus between two types of institutions. This action is the most common action used by most institutions in Vietnam. It is considered the best practice recommended by most peer reviewers in the program accreditation.

Transparency in QA is a significant step toward engaging stakeholders in the QA process. In addition to communicating the results to internal and external stakeholders in formal reports, placing transparent QA results on the institutions' websites is a common approach. Information most frequently viewed includes program outcomes assessment, implementation of program QA, activities of QA for academic programs, QA results, and use of results for quality improvement. It is interesting that there is no statistical difference between these two types of institutions in this section of the study regarding the announcement of program learning outcomes, IQA activities in practice, and the achievement of program learning outcomes. In fact, these three areas in the transparency of IQA activities to stakeholders did not receive much attention from Vietnamese HEIs and they did not do well. In addition, Vietnamese publicity policy did not emphasize the disclosure of student learning to the public; therefore, there might be no formal pressure to reveal this type of information. The application of the transparency framework (cf. Figure 1) could be a good reference for Vietnamese HEIs to use for improving the communication of student learning to diverse stakeholders (Pham, 2021).

As a result of the autonomy policy, institutions need to identify strategies for engaging multiple stakeholders in the QA process to make a real impact on student learning. Faculty members, in particular, play an important role in the implementation process. The research results indicated a statistical difference in all 14 strategies to engage faculty in QA activities between financial autonomy and state-funded institutions. All of the strategies scored more than four out of five on the Likert Scale. Other research studies indicated rewards had the greatest impact on faculty engagement in QA (Rickards & Stitt-Bergh, 2016). If the institutions have limited budgets, recognizing their efforts in faculty annual performance reports and teaching release time are alternative approaches (Smith & Gordon, 2018). More importantly, faculty members should be engaged in all QA activities, from participating in the seminars to leading key QA activities and training other faculty to engage in QA activities.

Transparency Framework

Figure 1. NILOA Transparency Framework

5. CONCLUSION

The autonomy policy has received much attention from policymakers and researchers in Vietnam for the past ten years. Many researchers have addressed the experience of implementing autonomy in Vietnamese HEIs, including the successes achieved and the barriers in the implementation process. The results of the autonomy policy encouraged most institutions to actively participate in QA activities to provide evidence for accreditation, one crucial criterion to be qualified for autonomy. Therefore, numerous research studies provided good practices for implementing QA in the Vietnamese context and identified support services to make the QA process simpler and more effective. However, there was no research addressing the impact of autonomy policy on QA activities by comparing two types of HEIs - public with financial autonomy and public without financial autonomy. The research presented in this paper tried to answer the question, *"Is there a difference in the QA activities of academic programs between two types of higher education institutions: public universities with financial autonomy and public universities without financial autonomy?"* The results indicated statistical differences in most of the activities in the research area. The quantitative results demonstrated the means of all QA activities in financial autonomy institutions are statistically higher than in state-funded institutions. The quantitative result provided strong evidence of the impact of autonomy policy on two types of HEIs, which was not addressed in the national report on autonomy policy in 2022. However, one limitation of this research was that it did not explain why there were the differences in the results. In addition, these quantitative results only represented the perspectives of the institutions that participated in the survey and might not provide representative data for all Vietnamese HEIs. Further research on this topic might include a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews to learn why such differences happened and how the financial autonomy HEIs implement QA activities differently from state-funded institutions.

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