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## FACTORS AFFECTING THE DEGREE OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN VIETNAM

Hien Phuc NGUYEN<sup>1</sup>, Thao Huong PHAM<sup>2</sup>, Tu Anh NGUYEN<sup>3</sup>, Anh Ngoc MAI<sup>4</sup>, Le Hong Thi HOANG<sup>5</sup>, Thuy Thi NGUYEN<sup>4\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for Testing and Quality Assurance, Foreign Trade University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Research Management, National Economics University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

<sup>3</sup>National Economics University Publishing House, National Economics University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

<sup>4\*</sup>Faculty of Management Science, National Economics University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup>Faculty of Transport Economics, University of Transport Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam.

**\*Corresponding Author**

**E-mail:** [thuy.nguyen9318@gmail.com](mailto:thuy.nguyen9318@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*The given analysis uses the exploratory factor analysis approach to identify the underlying relationships between measured variables of university autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education system. The findings reveal that although measured variables positively impact the degree of university autonomy across Vietnam's public higher education institutions, it differs across variables. While the executive and governing bodies have a restricted influence on organizational autonomy, they have been granted more power related to autonomous rights in academic autonomy. Although higher education institutions have been given decisions on developing their programs and curricula, its excellence has not yet met the requirements of the economy in the context of industrial revolution 4.0. Meanwhile, financial autonomy is another issue that needs to be revised as policies on financial autonomy in Vietnam differ from the rest of the world. Based on the restrictions of current policies on university autonomy in Vietnam, the paper then recommends solutions for a better Vietnam's tertiary education in the coming period.*

**Keywords:** University, Autonomy, Policies, Factors.

### INTRODUCTION

Since the Vietnamese government decided to shift to a market economy from a centralized economy, the university governance model has also changed to accommodate the market economy's requirements. As a result, autonomous privileges have gradually been granted to Vietnam's public higher education institutions managers. Procedural autonomy and substantive autonomy of public universities were progressively increased since the promulgation of the Resolution on Substantial and Comprehensive Renewal of Vietnam's Tertiary Education in the 2006–2020 Period, known as Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA). The Law on Amendments to Law on Higher Education (Law No. 34/2018/QH14), promulgated in 2018, created significant changes for the managers in running their institutions. Although after two years of implementing Law No. 34/2018/QH14, Vietnam's higher education system has significantly improved, several shortcomings from the current autonomy policies have been unraveled. Despite the fact that authors have discussed university autonomy in Vietnam in

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qualitative approaches, the quantitative methods on university autonomy are relatively rare. Therefore, assessing the degree of university autonomy of Vietnam's higher education institutions to make necessary adjustments for the development of this sector in the future is essential.

The structure of this article is as follows: after the literature review, the paper shows materials and methods for this research. The degree of autonomy of Vietnam's higher education institutions is presented in the result part. This thesis then discusses both positive and negative aspects of university autonomy from current policies. Recommendations for the incoming research are mentioned in the last portion.

### *Literature Review*

The original university was launched in the Middle Ages in Europe to serve the liberal nation-state until the 18th century. Given that the role of universities is to propagate knowledge, their role in contributing to the economic system is quite imperative (Gu *et al.*, 2018). The State began to take control of universities as tertiary education contributes to individual future earnings and the development of society (Han, 2020; Mai, 2022). HEIs belong to the state control or State supervising model. Irrespective of the governance model that the HE system belongs to, and Universities have evolved in various ways, the fundamental functions of universities would be eliminated, including preserving, developing, and disseminating knowledge in society (Adeniyi *et al.*, 2021). Teaching, research, and public services are always the three primary functions of universities (Wan & Sirat, 2018; Marini & Yang, 2021).

According to Berdahl (1990), higher education institutions were given autonomy based on the original tradition of elite education systems and were heavily supported financially by the state budget. Since the 1990s, university autonomy at public educational institutions has been understood as merely academic-related activities and broadly understood as financial autonomy, organization, and personnel structure. Tapper and Salter (1995) maintain that the autonomy of higher education institutions is determined according to the political context and mechanism. Consequently, the degree of university autonomy changes over time, depending on the legal framework and operating practices promulgated by public authorities. In comparison to the existing higher education institutions in previous centuries, Jongblut and Rexe (2017) both argue that the current autonomous rights granted to public higher education institutions in European countries are pretty limited.

University autonomy is the potential of a higher education institution in determining the forms and capabilities of capital mobilization. Autonomous universities, therefore, can decide on their strategies, establish linkage mechanisms with external organizations, and define the responsibilities of higher education institutions to society. University autonomy can also be defined as the institutions' executive and governing bodies running their universities without intervention from external authorities. Tang (2020) argues that university autonomy is the ability of a higher education institution to proactively make decisions to fulfill its mission based on its rights, duties, and legally mobilized resources. University autonomy means that a higher education institution operates its operations without outside interference (Zong & Zhang, 2019; Gao & Liu 2020).

Going back to the 1990s, the perception of public university autonomy has not only been in terms of academic affairs but also in financial, organizational, and staffing aspects (Pruvot &



Estermann, 2018; Azzawi *et al.*, 2021). The 4 aspects of university autonomy are summarized as follows:

*Organizational autonomy* refers to the autonomous rights in establishing the governing body and the executive body and forming the structures of subordinate functional units such as departments/boards/faculties that have been given to public universities. In fact, organizational structure differs across universities within a country and among countries. Therefore, the autonomous rights in establishing higher education institutions' executive and governing bodies and units are also different among countries.

*Financial autonomy* relates to the right that higher education institutions can access block-grant, line-item budgets, and the power to redistribute the state budget allocation to their institutions. In addition, financial autonomy also involves the right to decide on the sale of facilities and the right to determine tuition fees, and determine the financial sources of the institution.

*Academic autonomy* refers to the extent to which higher education institutions can decide on the content of the training programs and choose the language of instructions. Higher education institutions also have autonomous rights in deciding on the enrollment mechanism and the number of students recruited annually. Besides, the international training cooperation is also within the university's self-determination.

*Personnel autonomy* means that higher education institutions have been assigned more autonomous rights concerning the maintenance of permanent staff. A public university can annually re-sign labor contracts of senior lecturers who are no longer permanent staff owing to the reaching of retirement age. The resignation of labor contracts was regulated differently for different senior lecturers to those holding professorship, associate professorship, or doctoral degrees. In addition, Personnel autonomy refers to the situation that the presidents of universities appoint and dismiss deputy heads of units and leadership positions within their institutions.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

To evaluate the degree of autonomy among public higher education institutions in Vietnam since the Law on Amendments to Law on Higher Education was promulgated and came into life, the study investigated 200 lecturers working as permanent staff at 13 Vietnamese public institutions in 2020.

The collecting data is concentrated on the following main contents: (i) on the aspect of organizational autonomy, the collected data relates to information concerning assessments of interviewers on the degree of autonomy in establishing service units (TCBM1), institutes, faculty, and departments (TCBM2), as well as administrative units (TCBM3) (ii) on the aspect of financial autonomy, the collected data refers to interviewers' assessments on the power of reallocating state budget allocation (TCTC1), in redistributing the institution's residual income (TCTC2), the capacity in accessing loan on the financial market (TCTC3), or utilizing HEI's properties for joint ventures with the private sector (TCTC4), in determining tuition fees (TCTC5)... are also be included; (iii) on the aspect of personnel autonomy, the collected data refers to interviewers' assessments on the autonomous rights in recruiting lecturers and academic staff (TCNS1) or administrative staff (TCNS2), the decision on staff's appointment and dismissal (TCNS3), as well as salary payment for their staff (TCNS4), ... are also mentioned



(iv) On the aspect of academic autonomy, the collected data refers to interviewers' assessments on the autonomous rights in making decision in number of enrollment (TCHT1), planing institutions' enrollment plan (TCHT2), introducing new programs (TCHT1), and developing their curriculum (TCHT4)...; (v) The outputs, outcomes from implementing policies on university autonomy are also listed in the questionnaire. Of which, the growth of annual enrollment (TONGTHE1), the extension of programs (TONGTHE2), the increase of financial resources from training (TONGTHE3), the increase of academic papers published by Journals indexed by ISI/Scopus (TONGTHE4); the quality and quantity of academic staff (TONGTHE5), The ratio of students per lecturers (TONGTHE6), Quality of institution's infrastructures (TONGTHE7), University ranking (TONGTHE8), the income of institutions' staff (TONGTHE9), Employability of learners (TONGTHE10), the level of university autonomy (TONGTHE11). The questionnaire was combined both closed form (according to the Likert scale) and open form for respondents to fill in the appropriate box. This paper uses the strategies of West and Kreuter to increase the accuracy of interviewer observations of respondent features, 'given that interviewers are the eyes and ears of the survey organization' (West & Kreuter, 2018). The interviewers were managers and staff working in 13 Vietnamese public higher education institutions.

This study uses the exploratory factor analysis method to explore the degree of university autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education system under independent components. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is a classical formal measurement model that is used when both observed (dependent) and latent (independent) variables are assumed to be measured at the interval level. EFA is executed on the correlation matrix between the items (Ferrando *et al.*, 2019). In EFA, a latent variable is called a factor, and the associations between latent and observed variables are called factor loadings. Factor loadings are standardized regression weights. Since EFA is an exploratory technique, there is no expected distribution of loadings; thus, it is not possible to statistically test whether or not factor loadings are the same across cultural groups. EFA is often used in multidimensional situations where more than one latent variable is measured simultaneously. Before evaluating congruence, in this case, the factor structures should be rotated toward a target structure. Accordingly, the dependent (observed) variable is the degree of university autonomy (Uni\_auto), the independent (latent) variables are financial autonomy (F1), Organizational autonomy (F2), Staff autonomy (F3), Academic autonomy (F4).



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Step 1: Investigate the quality of the scale (factor)

**Table 1.** Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	.935			
	Item-Total Statistics			
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
TCBM1	97.9348	460.053	.690	.932
TCBM2	97.9973	457.804	.719	.931

TCBM3	97.9536	458.649	.690	.932
TCTC1	98.2536	460.582	.720	.932
TCTC2	98.0348	461.782	.693	.932
TCTC3	98.3473	459.221	.654	.932
TCTC4	98.3973	463.612	.615	.933
TCTC5	98.1348	458.432	.735	.931
TCNS1	97.7098	458.914	.714	.932
TCNS2	97.5536	433.121	.512	.938
TCNS3	97.5223	436.356	.488	.938
TCNS4	97.7348	462.616	.371	.937
TCHT1	97.9723	433.654	.502	.938
TCHT2	97.9161	461.494	.701	.932
TCHT3	97.8411	466.727	.641	.933
TCHT4	97.6536	468.392	.615	.933
TONGTHE1	98.1286	464.588	.706	.932
TONGTHE2	98.1348	464.092	.719	.932
TONGTHE3	97.9973	462.075	.374	.937
TONGTHE4	97.9098	464.323	.689	.932
TONGTHE5	97.8098	468.386	.675	.933
TONGTHE6	97.9661	468.324	.658	.933
TONGTHE7	97.9723	465.967	.676	.932
TONGTHE8	97.8161	467.676	.652	.933
TONGTHE9	98.2473	467.305	.667	.933
TONGTHE10	97.9036	466.858	.684	.932
TONGTHE11	98.1161	465.897	.749	.932

The scale is considered good quality when this value is greater than 0.6 (**Table 1**). In this field, observing the Item-Total Statistics Box, the value shows that the Cronbach's Alpha value of the scale is greater than 0.6. Therefore, the scales are of good quality

#### Step 2: Exploratory factor analysis

First, test the relevancy in exploratory factor analysis

**Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test**

<b>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</b>		<b>.869</b>
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2803.638
	df	120
	Sig.	.000

Any value that is less than 0.5 indicates the sample is too meager. Ideally, we require a 0.7 or above. In this given scenario, the value is KMO = 0.869 (**Table 2**), which satisfies the condition  $0.5 < \text{KMO} < 1$ . this translates to sufficient sample size.

Bartlett's test of sphericity is the second statistic. It denotes the adequate number of correlations between our variables for factor analysis. Here, we are looking for a significance value of less than your alpha level (i.e.  $p < .001$ ), which means that observed variables have a linear correlation with the representative factor.

The study then followed to test the explanatory level of the observed variables for the factor.

**Table 3. Summary of Explained Variances**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	8.256	51.601	51.601	8.256	51.601	51.601	3.884	24.275	24.275
2	2.524	15.777	67.378	2.524	15.777	67.378	3.317	20.730	45.005
3	1.230	7.688	75.066	1.230	7.688	75.066	2.937	18.357	63.363
4	1.033	6.459	81.525	1.033	6.459	81.525	2.906	18.162	81.525
5	.864	5.401	86.926						
6	.411	2.571	89.497						
7	.343	2.142	91.638						
8	.299	1.866	93.504						
9	.236	1.477	94.981						
10	.200	1.253	96.234						
11	.169	1.053	97.287						
12	.148	.924	98.212						
13	.124	.773	98.984						
14	.096	.601	99.585						
15	.047	.296	99.881						
16	.019	.119	100.000						

The Cumulative column only knows that the extracted variance is 81.525% (**Table 3**). This means that 81.525% of the variation of the factors is explained by the observed variables (components of the Factor).

The factor rotation matrix shows that all special variables have factor loading coefficients greater than 0.55. **Table 4** shows the 4 factors representing the degree of autonomy of higher education institutions:

Factor 1 (component 1) includes variables: TCTC1, TCTC2, TCTC3, TCTC4, TCTC5. This factor is named Financial Autonomy

Factor 2 (component 2) includes variables: TCBM1, TCBM2, TCBM3, TCNS1. This factor is named Autonomy

Factor 3 (component 3) includes variables: TCNS2, TCNS3, TCHT1. This factor is named HR Autonomy

Factor 4 (component 4) includes variables: TCHT2, TCHT3, TCHT4. This factor is named Academic Autonomy





Table 4. Factor Rotation Matrix

	1	2	3	4
TCBM1		.792		
TCBM2		.832		
TCBM3		.839		
TCTC1	.787			
TCTC2	.655			
TCTC3	.864			
TCTC4	.832			
TCTC5	.677			
TCNS1		.668		
TCNS2			.963	
TCNS3			.967	
TCNS4				
TCHT1			.963	
TCHT2				.791
TCHT3				.856
TCHT4				.864

Through testing of scales and testing of EFA models, there are 4 scales representing the degree of autonomy of higher education institutions with a total of 15 characteristic variables belonging to the Adjusted model through Cronbach Alpha test and exploratory factor analysis. Of which, the Finan\_auto (Financial autonomy) scale covers variables including TCTC1, TCTC2, TCTC3, TCTC4, TCTC5; the Orga\_auto (Organizational autonomy) scale includes variables relating to TCBM1, TCBM2, TCBM3, TCNS1; the Staff\_auto (Staff autonomy) scale covers variables including TCNS2, TCNS3, TCHT1; the Acad\_auto (Academic autonomy) scale covers variables such as TCHT2, TCHT3, TCHT4; the Uni\_auto (Degree of autonomy of higher education institutions) scale covers variables including TONGTHE1, TONGTHE2, TONGTHE3, TONGTHE4, TONGTHE5, TONGTHE6, TONGTHE7, TONGTHE8, TONGTHE9, TONGTHE10, TONGTHE11.

Table 5. Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.741 <sup>a</sup>	.548	.537	.68482168

a. Predictors: (Constant), Financial autonomy, Organizational autonomy, Staff autonomy, Academic autonomy

Regression analysis shows that the adjusted level of R<sup>2</sup> is 0.548 (Table 5). Thus, 54.8% change in the degree of autonomy of higher education institutions is demonstrated by independent variables from the model.

Table 6. Analysis of Variance

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1					
Regression	88.282	4	22.071	47.061	.000 <sup>a</sup>
Residual	72.692	155	.469		

Total	160.974	159
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a. Predictors: (Constant), Financial autonomy, Organizational autonomy, Staff autonomy, Academic autonomy

b. Dependent Variable: Degree of autonomy of higher education institutions

The Analysis of Variance table shows that, with Sig. <0.001 can conclude the model is consistent with the actual data (**Table 6**). In other words, the independent variables are linearly correlated with the dependent variable and the confidence level is 99%.

**Table 7.** The results of the regression model reflect the degree of autonomy of higher education institutions under the influence of the following factors

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-.006	.054		-.106	.916
1					
Finan_auto	.461	.054	.459	8.512	.000
Orga_auto	.302	.054	.300	5.567	.000
Staff_auto	.181	.054	.181	3.347	.001
Acad_auto	.471	.055	.466	8.631	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Uni\_auto

**Table 7** indicates the regression model of the degree of autonomy of Vietnam's higher education institutions. It is shown as follows:

$$\text{Uni\_auto} = 0.461 \text{ Finan\_auto} + 0.302 \text{ Orga\_auto} + 0.181 \text{ Staff\_auto} + 0.471 \text{ Acad\_auto} + e_i \quad (1)$$

The results illustrate that the four pillars of university autonomy are considered to have a positive relationship with the autonomy of Vietnam's higher education institutions. However, the degree of staff autonomy and organizational autonomy is relatively low. In contrast, the degree of academic autonomy and financial autonomy is appreciated with a higher value.

### *Recommendations*

Despite the components showing a positive relationship with the degree of autonomy in Vietnam's public higher education institutions, there are still many problems arising in each pillar of autonomy, which harm the development of each institution as well as Vietnam's higher education system in the coming period.

*Firstly, on the aspect of financial autonomy,* Vietnam's higher education sector has been marketized, universities have become providers of higher education services, faculty members have become suppliers, and students have become customers. Higher education fees have become a debate forum not only in Vietnam but also in many other countries. With the current policies on university autonomy, universities participating in Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP have increased their revenue through tuition fees for maintaining the institution's operation in the context of cutting the state funding for higher education institutions. As tuition fees become the primary mobilizing source for HEIs, enrollment extension becomes an inevitable trend. The more students an institution enrolls, the more time for instructing lecturers. Consequently, academic staff has to spend more hours on tutoring and less time conducting and publishing the researched results in international journals that are owned by the ISI/Scopus indexes. The





academic environment is therefore still inadequate nurturing, irrespective of disciplines related to health sciences, Social sciences and humanities, Material sciences and engineering as well as biomedical sciences. The accessibility of students to documents in electronic libraries in all disciplines is not adequate, as online libraries have limited materials due to a lack of funding. In addition, public HEIs can not obtain their libraries and laboratories following international standards unless being funded by the state budget (Do & Mai, 2021). Notably, as borrowing of money from the financial market and the institutions' staff for the improvement of university's infrastructure and educational quality has been canceled with the expiration of *Decree on Providing for the Right to Autonomy and Self-responsibility for Task Performance, Organizational Apparatus, Payroll, and Finance of Public Non-business Units* (Decree No 43/2006/ND-CP) from 1 July 2016.

As financial autonomy is being understood in the local context, the connotation of financial autonomy differs from the universal notation. Consequently, autonomous HEIs rely on tuition fees instead of block-grant or line-item budgets for their operations (Mai, 2022). The Vietnamese government should revise the policies on financial autonomy in accordance with the international perspective. Block-grant or line-item budgets are the essential portion of the institution's revenues to improve universities' infrastructure. The Vietnamese government should never eliminate public expenditure on higher education costs per student (Mai, 2020; Panasenکو *et al.*, 2021).

*Secondly, on the aspect of organizational autonomy*, the promulgation of Decree on Elaborating and Providing Guidelines for numerous articles of Law on Amendments to Law on Higher Education (Decree No 99) has addressed restrictions of Law No. 34/2018/QH14 concerning the executive body and the governing body in HEIs. The governing body nominates the president of a public university and submits it to the external authority for approval, whereas members of the governing body are chosen from an electing procedure, selected members of governing body proposes the university council' chairman: 'suppose the tenure of the principal and that of the university council end concurrently, it is possible to extend the principal's tenure until the supervisory authority encounters a new principal per application from the new university council' (Do & Mai, 2021).

The presidents of universities have been granted authority on introducing, merging, or dismissing units, faculties and departments within their institutions except for the executive body and the governing body, the committee of the communist party, and the academic council. Although organizational autonomy has been legalized, the presidents of public universities are facing difficulties in implementing this authority, particularly in HEIs, which are under line-management control by various central federal agencies and sectoral ministries other than the ministry of education and training (Mai *et al.*, 2020).

*Thirdly, on the aspect of staff autonomy*, the presidents of public universities implementing Resolution No 77/NQ-CP are granted decision-making powers on the recruitment or dismissal of their staff. It is not easy for public universities to sign a tenure or permanent contract with talented Vietnamese scholars overseas.

*Last but not Least, on the Aspect of Academic Autonomy*



With the autonomous rights assigned to them, several public universities are planning on conducting other admission methods instead of organizing entry exams annually to reduce the burdens put upon learners, their families, and society as it happened a decade ago. The test results from the national high school final exam would not be the unique plan for student admission. Having prizes from provincial, national and international competitions . . . should be added as other schemes for entry.

Since 2017 the presidents of universities have been granted the authority to introduce a new course with the enforcement of *Circular on Conditions, Procedures for Offering Courses and Suspension of Enrolment and Revocation of Decision on Offering Courses at Bachelor's Degree Level (Circular 22/2017/TT-BGDĐT)*. Although presidents of universities have been granted the authority to build their curricula, the ideological subjects were compulsory, and the MOET fixes these credits, to meet the national objective of promoting socialist modernization. In addition, although lecturers have been encouraged to introduce textbooks, even republish or update the previous ones, it is difficult for students to access this kind of material. Unless having textbooks, program accreditation would never be passed by quality assurance providers (Nguyen & Shah, 2019). If this criterion is widely publicized, it will create conditions to advance the quality of higher education.

The promulgation of *Circular on Regulations on enrollment and training at the doctoral level (Circular No. 08/2017 / TT-BGDĐT)*, the Ministry of Education and Training has expected to increase the quality of both inputs as well as outputs for the doctoral training process because of the high quality of requirements and conditions for instructors and Ph.D. candidates. However, after four years of implementing this Circular, instructors' and candidates' qualitative and quantitative improvements were insufficient. Therefore, instead of keeping the standard, the Ministry of Education and Training has reduced the quality demands for instructors. As a result, instructors have articles published in domestic scientific journals or monographs published by reputable domestic (Circular 18/2021/TT-BGD&DT) instead of being the principal author of articles indexed by the system of ISI/Scopus. To improve the quality of graduated Ph.D. candidates, requirements on the paper publication of Ph.D. candidates should be improved. Unless being a co-author with Ph.D. candidates' principal instructor in a paper published by a journal indexed by ISI/Scopus system or journals in the first-class domestic category, the final round of thesis defense would not be promulgated. Poor quality papers from Ph.D. students affect the instructor's reputation, and accordingly, the supervisor position may be revoked in the following years.

## CONCLUSION

Using the exploratory factor analysis method to explore factors affecting the degree of autonomy of Vietnam higher education institutions from 200 interviewers with questionnaires from 13 public institutions nationwide. The result shows that the four pillars of university autonomy, including Financial autonomy, Organizational autonomy, Staff autonomy, Academic autonomy, represent positive signs towards university autonomy. Besides the positive aspects of current policies on university autonomy, this paper also point-outs restrictions of these policies and discusses solutions for a better higher education sector in Vietnam in the coming years. Although several recommendations have been mentioned to promote the improvement of the HE sector in



Vietnam, conditions for implementing these solutions require more extensive discussions. It is beyond the scope of this study to conduct such intensive research.

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