**Governance Renovation of the Vietnamese Higher Education and Its Influences on Teaching Quality**

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*Significant changes in governance of the Vietnamese higher education started in 1993 as a result of changes in policies of education. The most commonly agreed positive outcome of the governance renovation process is the formation of a modern mechanism for quality assurance in the higher education system that has been putting higher education institutions under pressure of ensuring a threshold quality level, being accountable for their performance, and developing internal quality assurance. However, whether the development of quality assurance, which is in the case of Vietnam stimulated by quality accreditation, can touch quality improvement is still doubtful. The paper argues that the governance renovation in Vietnam would not enhance the quality of higher education unless there was an effective accountability and reward-punishment mechanism.*

## 1. Introduction

Governance is a new concept not only in higher education research but also in the field of public administration. The application of new models of organization of higher education institutions (HEIs) and decentralization of management can be seen as a renovation (đổi mới) of governance of this sector in Vietnam. This paper clarifies the concept of governance in higher education research and then limits its focus of interest on the changing relation between the state and HEIs. By way of historical and documentary analyses, the paper investigates changes in policies at the national level as a result of the shift in the state governing philosophy and their impacts on the governance of higher education. Like reforms of higher education in East Asia (Mok 2007), higher education in Vietnam has been changing towards diversifying financial sources and incorporating more societal-actors in its governance. The paper continues discussing whether the finance-driven provision higher education deteriorates the quality of higher education or not. In conclusion, the paper argues that governance renovation would not enhance the quality of higher education unless there was an effective accountability and reward-punishment mechanism. The paper draws on diversified literature on higher education research, official documents, and information from interviews with university managers and academics.

## 2. The Concept of Governance in Higher Education Research

The most common understanding about the term governance is definitions proposed by dictionaries. In these basic sources of word meanings, governance refers to an action or a method of governing activities. That means governance refers to steering and regulation. Government is another older concept also used to describe governing. In the sense of a system or a method of governing a society, government refers to political directions and controls exercised by formal agents. In contrast to government, governance believes in elements of social self-regulation and it includes both public and private actors in the process of decision-making. A shift from government to governance mainly means that a switch from a state-dominant decision-making process to an empowerment of various actors.

The conception of governance, which is like some concepts in social sciences such as government, state, society, administration and so on, has a wide-ranging meaning. Therefore, scholars have mostly accepted working definitions of governance. A simple working definition of governance refers to the way or how the institution steers itself rather than what is done, and why and who do it (Kehm 2010; Edwards 2000, cited in Reed, Meek & Jones 2002: xxvii). Governance consists of two elements: a system of rules that shapes the framework for operation of institutions and the way by which an institution is run (Mayntz 2004). Governance research on higher education governance emphasizes more on the institutional level. Areas of investigation have largely resided in two dimensions which are the power relation between higher education institutions and the state, and administration structures and management mechanism within institutions

The central concern of research on higher education governance is the question of how universities response to the changing environment or pressures from external demands (Kehm 2010). Recent pieces of research on governance of higher education have addressed two main themes. First, the relationship between the state and universities has changed towards a less control of the government ; Braun & Merrien 1999a). Second, there has been a shift in the model of governance of universities. Dynamics of higher education governance in Europe have presented the tendency of shifting from traditional models governance towards a new governance model or new managerialism that incorporates more or less management styles of private business sectors a; .

Responses of higher education in Vietnam to the new environment have been reflected by changes in policy at the system level that shift the relationship between the state and HEIs. However, management of higher education by detailed regulations is still dominant so that HEIs have few areas and incentives for innovating institutional management. This is the reason for the focus on the state and HEIs relationship in this paper.

## 3. Governance Renovation of Higher Education in Vietnam

### Economic Reform and Changing State Management Ideology since 1986

Since 1976, the year of the country reunification, Vietnam imposed the Soviet-style central planning model all over the country. Both in the North and the South, the government fortified state ownership, regulated prices of most goods and services, imposed a closed policy on international relations. The period between 1976 and 1986 witnessed a poor economic performance and a large incidence of poverty.

In December 1986, the Communist Party of Vietnam resolved on a policy package of economic renovation which is often referred to as economic reform (*đổi mới*). The economic reform replaced the central planning with a regulated market economy. The economic reform officially recognized status of private economy and promoted its development. The Communist Party Central Committee of Vietnam (Ban chấp hành trung ương Đảng) intensified the economic reform with the adoption of a comprehensive and consistent guideline towards encouraging market mechanism and private economic activities in March 1989. Since then, the government reduced subsidies to state-owned enterprises (SOEs), gave them a legally autonomous entity and forced them to be independent in finance. The government also promoted equitization of SOEs, attracted foreign investment and foreign and domestic capital as well.

Profound changes in economic policies have demonstrated a shift in underlying governing philosophy of the state. The state has been no longer directed SOEs by ordinance schemes but let the market mechanism, including price, supply, and demand, guide them. The economic reform was quite critical in abolishing barriers and creating a legal framework which could mobilize diverse economic-growth contributing resources, it, however, seemed to not touch state agencies where at that time HEIs belonged to. The view of higher education as public goods kept the higher education sector not immediately following the urge to diversify financial sources. It is quite clear that the Vietnamese government gives economic activities and organizations a full level of autonomy but whatever in charge of political and social missions is tackled with prudence.

### Higher Education Policies since 1993

Reforms in the economic sector have had effects on the higher education sector. In 1988, a pilot modality of a non-public HEI was adopted at Thang Long People-founded Learning Center (Trung tâm đại học dân lập Thăng Long). A people-founded institution was not funded by the state and allowed to impose tuition fees. The institution’s features of ownership and funding characterized it as a private institution in substance. “The word people-founded was to avoid the word private which was not accepted by the society at that time” (Hoang 2008). The emergence of a pilot non-public HEI was one of the cautious steps made by the government so that it could understand how private HEIs are and accept them as a response to increasing demand for higher education and limited public funding. In the early 1990s, several public universities were allowed to collect tuition fees from a few students who did not reach the entrance mark threshold for being fully subsidized by the state. After years of trials, in January 1993, the Communist Party Central Committee of Vietnam adopted a resolution on education renovation continuation which crucially directed higher education development (Resolution 04-NQ/HNTW). The resolution referred to non-public institutions, restructuring of the higher education system, and higher education expansion.

The resolution came into effects immediately. During 1993 a couple of important milestones in higher education development were set up. The first non-public HEIs were officially established (Hayden & Dao 2010) and public HEIs were allowed to collect tuition fees within a regulated frame (Hayden & Lam 2010). The Western modern universities style was introduced by incorporating several existing universities and research institutes into an institution, which has characteristics of large-scaled, multidisciplinary, and research-oriented, called the national university. The national universities enjoyed a higher level of autonomy in academic, financial and organizational matters than other HEIs. The national universities do not have to consult the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) with budgetary decisions and curriculum frameworks (Hayden & Lam 2010) and are fully autonomous in structuring disciplinary departments and functional offices.

Drastic higher education expansion since 1993 raised concerns for its quality. Several pieces of research on quality management were conducted. The year 2004 is considered as the starting point for introduction of quality management through scrutiny of criteria fulfillment (Vu 2009). The MOET played an active and leading role in introduction of education accreditation. A provisional regulation on accreditation of HEIs was issued at the end of the year (Decision 38 /2004/QĐ-BGD&ĐT). The birth of standards on institutional accreditation raised the idea of the state’s distant supervision of higher education via performance indicators.

Between 1998 and 2004, stratification of HEIs was carried out (Hayden & Lam 2010) that formulated three main descending-ranked groups including ‘key’ research-oriented universities (trường ĐH trọng điểm), universities or senior colleges (trường đại học), and junior colleges (trường cao đẳng)[[1]](#footnote-2). The classification of HEIs has had important effects on practices of governance of higher education. Universities of the first-class rank have gotten more trust from the MOET and enjoyed more public funding and autonomy than ones of the lower rank.

The recently most comprehensive policy on higher education renovation is the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) which was approved by the Cabinet in November 2005 (Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP). Concerning governance of higher education, the HERA proposed four issues: (1) transforming public HEIs into a legally autonomous institution, (2) eliminating line-management ministry mechanism, (3) focusing the state management via designing and directing development strategy, reinforcing accountability mechanism, and (4) developing a higher education law. Of which, the first issue was clarified and implemented through the promulgation of the Decree 43/2006 and its detailed regulation which grant more autonomy in terms of mission performance, organizational structure, personnel tenure, and finance to all HEIs (Decree 43/2006/NĐ-CP, Circular 07/2009/TTLT-BGDDT-BNV). The second issue has been under debates for clearer understanding and consensus. The third issue has step by step been implemented, for instance, the Three Disclosures Regulation (Circular 09/2009/TT-BGDĐT). For final issue, the Higher Education Law has been in the process of development.

Renovation of higher education management is considered as an urgent task and “a through-breaking element in order to enhance quality and comprehensive development of higher education” for the period 2010-2012 (Directive 296/CT-TTg). Continuingly, the Cabinet prescribed responsibility of ministries, local authorities for management of education in December 2010 (Decree 115/2010/NĐ-CP). Whether these above policies are effective in promoting higher education quality will be discussed in sections 4 and 5.

### Governance Renovation and Growing Level of Autonomy for Universities

One of the most-cited heuristic pieces of description of higher education governance reforms is the five governance dimension measure proposed by . These five dimensions are state regulation, managerial self-governance, external guidance, market competition, and academic self-governance, where:

* state regulation refers to the state authority in enacting detailed regulations or directives to regulate the institution’s behaviors in certain circumstances.
* managerial self‐governance refers to authority for university managers in goal setting, decision‐making and policy implementing within the institution.
* external guidance refers to influences of external stakeholders through setting and advising goals and regulatory procedures of the institution.
* market competition in higher education refers to a struggle among and within universities for funding and students.
* academic self‐governance refers to academic authority in determining institutions’ goals and supervising operation as well as outcomes.

Changes in governance of higher education in Vietnam in terms of five dimensions could be described as followings: a gentle shift from the state control to state supervision of higher education, a higher level of autonomy for universities or more authority for institutional leaders, low market competition, involvement of international partners, and a societal mistrust of academic self‐governance.

The shift from the state control to state supervision of higher education has been not drastic but prudent through many policies and measures which might be experimental examples, at the first place, and then are generalized into legal framework later on. Adoption of HEIs’ income-generating activities has brought out a partial independence of public HEIs from the state. Introduction of the Western style of universities has raised the issue of institutional autonomy. A shift from the state control to the state supervision of higher education has become a reality in terms of practices of lump sum grants and extra funding based on institutional performance. Expansion of higher education has claimed a modern system of quality management which has been approached from the quality accreditation perspective. Recently, the relation between university autonomy and accountability has increasingly been debated and focused. The MOET has been developing the framework for oversight and accountability. However, the state regulation of higher education in Vietnam is prevalent. Important decisions are still made by the state, including enrollment quotas, mass higher education tuition fees (for public institutions), curriculum frameworks, degree program opening, and expenditure norms (for public institutions).

Power of institutional leaders has increased as a result of the shift from the state control to the state supervision of higher education. Under prescription of the Decree 43/2006, rectors are fully autonomous in performing missions which have been included in approved development plans. In detail, institutional leaders are allowed to have decisions on personnel recruitment, on restructuring academic departments and functional offices, and on spending self-generated income without consulting with the line-management ministries. Managerial self-governance plays an active role in recognizing and making use of entrepreneurial activities. The Decree 49/2010 by the Cabinet grants universities autonomy in imposing tuition fees for high quality degree programs. Information in Table 1 shows that in comparison to universities in countries where have been undergone a higher education governance shift the level of autonomy for Vietnamese universities is not low. However, the substance of autonomy for HEIs in Vietnam is different from that in countries with less state regulation. Decisions made by institutional leaders in Vietnam must conform to plenty of regulations on detailed issues. In the end, the remainder for initiative is small and management at public HEIs is to follow the state rules.

***Table 1. Freedom Level of Universities:***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Own their building and equipments | Borrow funds | Spend budgets | Set academic structure | Employ and dismiss academic staff | Set salaries | Decide student enrollment numbers | Decide level of tuition fees |
| England | ● | ◗ | ● | ● | ● | ● | ◗ | ◗ |
| Netherlands | ● | ● | ● | ◗ | ● | ● | ● | ◗ |
| Germany\* | ◗ | ◗ | ● | ◗ | ◗ | ◗ | ◗ | ◗ |
| Vietnam | ◗ | ◗ | ◗ | ◗ | ● | ◗ | ◗ | ◗ |

*Source:* Data for England and the Netherlands provided in OECD (2003: 63)

\*: Data for Germany based on Estermann & Nokkala (2009)

●: have full autonomy;

◗: have some respects of autonomy

The adoption of tuition fees means that market demand comes into the provision of higher education. The higher education enrollment rate reached 13% in 2004 (World Bank 2008). This means Vietnam is now in the early stage of mass higher education. Because tuition fees have been fixed at a low ceiling level for mass degree programs in public institutions price of public higher education is quite cheap. Demand for higher education is high while provision is constrained by the number of lecturers, infrastructure and training capacity. Universities which have a long-standing history and are located in big cities have been sustained their prestigious status not urged to participate in competition for students. Higher education market in Vietnam is supply-led; therefore, competition among public providers is rarely. Market competition is an emerging battle for private HEIs.

External guidance on the Vietnamese higher education management is highly affected by resource dependence. Third parties, for example, the World Bank, the Netherlands government, have been lending and aiding quite a number of projects on reform of higher education management, and education quality assurance, and so on. Development assistance through personnel development and research projects has attracted a group of the elite who are more likely to support the third parties’ ideas and policies. In terms of academic standards, a couple of universities have been initiating into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) University Network. In order to participate in the student exchange programs of the ASEAN University Network (AUN), Vietnamese universities have to adjust and improve academic programs to fulfill the requirements of quality assurance by the AUN.

Authority for academics in deciding academic matters has not changed much under new policies on governance. Although the MOET requires universities to carry out student evaluation of teaching, academic staff is still considered as main supervisors of quality. Vietnamese higher education managers are often selected from successful academic staff. They often appreciate academic values and norms and avoid conflicts with the academics bloc. There is an increase in the use of performance indicators for management but the role of peer review has not been weakened in the sense that it has never been replaced or abandoned. However, deterioration of higher education quality during recent years caused a societal mistrust in academic self-governance. Due to a low basic salary level, teachers have been overloaded with teaching hours to earn extra income. They claim that low quality of higher education is indispensible when teachers cannot live on their salary. Poor inputs (namely starveling teachers) obviously produce poor products (namely low quality of teaching). Somewhere exist initiatives in enhancing teaching quality as will be mentioned in section 4, but these are seldom light points in the whole system[[2]](#footnote-3).

Shifts in governmental ideologies towards favoring the HEIs status as a corporate organization with given areas and extent of autonomy have crucially changed the regulatory framework at the system and practices of management at both the system and institution level. Governance of higher education in Vietnam is a new concept and reality as well. Changes in higher education management can be seen as governance renovations.

## 4. Influences of Governance Renovation on Quality Management

### Development of a Nation-wide Quality Assurance and Accreditation System

Education quality management by means of education accreditation was implemented in 2004. The Directive 25/2004/CT-BGD&ĐT required education management agencies at all levels and HEIs to “set up and improve organization and machine, and implement activities of educational testing and accreditation”. The MOET directive has been carried out promptly. A national agency responsible for monitoring quality in the whole education system was established in September of this year. Up to 2010, nearly half of HEIs have had quality support units which are called quality assurance centers (Report 329/BC-UBTVQH12). Accreditation of institutional quality standards at 20 universities was finished. Hundreds of HEIs have been conducting their self-evaluation of quality. Activities of preparing self-evaluation reports of quality for either getting accreditation certification or examiners’ advice have promoted the culture towards quality assurance in HEIs.

It is quite clear that the governmental external quality management approach through quality accreditation has fostered an awareness of a threshold higher education quality level. The formation of a modern mechanism for quality assurance in the higher education system has been putting pressure on HEIs to ensure a threshold quality level, to be accountable for their performance, and to develop internal quality assurance. This is probably the most commonly agreed positive outcome of the governance renovation process.

### Introduction of Internationally Recognized Quality Standards

Expansion of higher education has caused quality standards of higher education spread into a wider range. In one group, universities and senior colleges, for example, quality standards of new-established or/and private HEIs often lag far behind long-standing public universities. For key universities, the fulfillment of accreditation standard levels is within their reach. Their goals are to integrate into the Southeast Asian region and get international recognition of their degrees.

Initiates to implement internationally recognized quality standards have been proceeded from HEIs individually. Two national universities are first institutions employing standards of the ASEAN University Network (AUN). At the institutional level, many universities have promoted reference to standards of international accreditation agencies and of professional associations when renovating their curricula. At the subject group (tổ bộ môn) level, qualified and committed academic staff has proactively been upgrading teaching materials, using international textbooks, practicing modern methods of teaching and testing. Later on, to build up elite study programs and HEIs, the MOET has funded a project on development of advanced undergraduate programs which adopt curricula of prestigious foreign universities and are taught in English by foreign and domestic lecturers. The use of internationally recognized quality standards in each stage of teaching has resulted in a small proportion of relatively high quality provision at the peak of the higher education system. This result is mostly attributable to initiatives of individual institutions and the practice of academic self-governance.

### Emphasizing Research Role of Universities

Being influenced by the Soviet model of economy, scientific research in Vietnam was mainly in charged by academies of science which are outside the higher education sector. The introduction of the Western model of modern universities in the mid 1990s incorporated the research function into universities. However, research activities by universities have soundly been aware of and emphasized until HEIs participated in the institutional accreditation. Availability of supporting policies and practices of research is one out of ten major criteria of accreditation of HEIs. Universities have started purposely increasing resources for research and improving performance indicators of research.

Honestly, teaching staff at universities in Vietnam was unfamiliar with doing research. Huge workload of teaching tasks and lack of research skills have hindered their performance of research. Although research activities at universities in Vietnam might be for the most part unqualified for international publications, research activities in forms of updating subject matter knowledge, inquiring and applying new ideas and practices of methods of teaching and testing have been effectively contributing to enhancement of teaching quality. It seems to be that the new research experience of Vietnamese universities has provided academic staff with research questions and topics closely related to their teaching career. There has been much of evidence supporting the positive correlation between practices of research and quality of teaching in Vietnam.

### Student-centered Approach to Quality Assurance

Students are not allowed to participate in decision-making but their voices are counted in decision of academic matters. Student evaluation of teaching has been a compulsory practice of institutional quality evaluation since the academic year 2009-2010 (Correspondence 1276/BGDĐT-NG). Because there are aspects of teaching performance that cannot be evaluated only by students most universities regard student evaluations of teaching as one source of information for improving effectiveness of teaching and curricula. The student evaluation has not been used for judging teachers’ competences and for sanction.

However, the student evaluation of teaching has a remarkably effect through the registration of courses in the credit-based system. For selected courses, a teacher is not highly rated by students of previous courses is less likely to have these courses in later semesters because students are less likely to register courses taught by this teacher. Because results of student evaluation are not publicly announced, students formulate teachers’ reputation via word of mouth. Pressures under the student evaluation have been forcing teachers to improve course’s organization, teacher’s knowledge of subject matter, teacher’s communication, teachers’ responsiveness, and so on.

## 5. Does Governance Renovation Enhance Teaching Quality?

It is rather ironic but not surprised for the author that when being asked to give judgment on training quality of a HEI, both institutional managers and academics were often very cautious and did not give a straight answer, good, acceptable, or bad quality, for instance. That is due to a disputable nature of the concept of quality. How could this paper come to a conclusion on the state of higher education quality in Vietnam?

The key factor contributing to worries for and criticism of higher education quality deterioration is the expansion speed of higher education enrollment has been many times as high as the speed of training capacity. According to the MOET, higher education has “not ensured the requirement for enhancement of training quality in the whole system” (Report 760/BC-BGDĐT). It is a rather tactful comment. The enhancement of quality everywhere in the system when higher education is in transition from elite to mass is a utopian target. For the mass, new-developed sector, because of disadvantages in limited training experiences and infrastructure, less-able students, lack of teaching staff it was even ideal if the sector could ensure the threshold quality level. However, for elite and key HEIs, have they been losing their quality?

The elite and key HEIs, in the trend towards higher education expansion, has also enlarged training size and enrolled more students. Teaching staff has been involved in more courses and taught more students. When teachers have been overloaded with teaching hours their time for updating knowledge, for innovating methods and teaching and testing, for contact with students reduced. Teachers are the crucial factor contributing to education quality; therefore, low teachers’ commitment to teaching has deteriorated the higher education quality.

Higher education has rapidly expanded for nearly two decades while development of quality management tools has lasted for a half of that time. In principle, quality assurance by accreditation and disclosure ensures a threshold of higher education quality. This helps to stop the deterioration of quality at the domain under and around the threshold. For the domain above the threshold, they also have incentives to improve their quality. That the low quality of higher education is blamed on teachers’ low income level has no longer convinced when universities have been allowed to set tuition fees for high quality study programs. Excellent higher education will be sufficiently rewarded from the tuition fees source. Improvement in higher education quality at the domain above the threshold will be realistic and it, in turn, helps to lift the whole-system quality.

## 6. Conclusions

Renovation of higher education in Vietnam has been brought about new patterns of governance of higher education. However, enrollment expansion and finance-driven governance renovation has also resulted in deterioration of higher education quality. Quality improvement by governance renovation is in the top priority of the higher education development agenda. More institutional autonomy, quality assurance, and disclosure are measures of management but not an overall framework of governance renovation. Therefore, besides enhancing the effectiveness of management tools Vietnam also should figure out an all-embracing structure of governance of higher education.

Recent policies on three disclosures and un-fixed tuition fees for high quality study programs are being expected to result in consolidation of higher education quality. However, implementing these policies effectively is still in need to be discussed.

* Disclosures would mobilize the societal supervision of HEIs but institutions could still cheat to have nice figures. Educating people so that they should care about and be able to understand figures and meanings of disclosed documents is also necessary.
* What are the high quality study programs and what would be the acceptable levels of tuition fees? In the higher education market, the price of a study program is not influenced only by the quality of provision but also the labor market demand for the field of study. There would be high quality study programs which could not have enough students to be sustainable, for example, natural sciences and engineering. Initial pains of the free market are indispensible. Who would be the vulnerable and what would be the role of state in this instrument of enhancing higher education quality?

Governance of higher education in Vietnam is still in the early stage of renovation. Many challenges are out. State policies on renovation of state management of higher education are the top-down perspective of renovation. Bottom-up involvement of HEIs and academics is also potential for the success of the process. An effective reward-punishment mechanism would certainly foster the modernization of higher education governance.

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***State Policies***

1. Circular 07/2009/TTLT-BGDDT-BNV, dated 15th September 2009, on Instruction of Implementing Institutional Autonomy
2. Circular 09/2009/TT-BGDĐT, dated 7th May 2009, on Regulation of Three Disclosures
3. Correspondence 1276/BGDĐT-NG, dated 20th February 2008, on Instruction of Student Evaluation of Teaching
4. Decision 38 /2004/QĐ-BGD&ĐT dated 2nd December 2004, on Provisional Regulation of Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions
5. Decree 43/2006/NĐ-CP, dated 25th April 2006, on Institutional Autonomy
6. Decree 49/2010/NĐ-CP, dated 14th May 2010, on Tuition Fees
7. Directive 25/2004/CT-BGD&ĐT, dated 02nd August 2004, on Missions of Education System in the Academic Year 2004 -2005
8. Directive 296/CT-TTg, dated 27th February 2010, on Renovating Higher Education Management for the Period of 2010-2012
9. Report 329/BC-UBTVQH12, dated 29th May 2010, by the National Assembly Standing Committee on “Implementing Policy and Law on Establishing Schools, Investment, and Assuring Quality in Higher Education”
10. Report 760/BC-BGDĐT, dated 29th October 2009, on Solutions to Ensure and Enhance Training Quality
11. Resolution 04-NQ/HNTW, dated 14th January 1993, on Education Renovation Continuation
12. Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP, dated 2nd November 2005, on Comprehensive Higher Education Renovation during the period 2005-2020
1. The word ‘university’ in the official name of a HEI in Vietnam is not identical with the brand ‘university’ in the Western model of modern universities. In this paper, the university refers to a HEI which offers degrees from undergraduate to graduate. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. There are about 35 universities having high-quality undergraduate degree programs out of 412 HEIs, of which 180 are universities (Report 329/BC-UBTVQH12). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)