

# On the units “departments”, “bureaus”, and “institutes”: from an international comparative perspective to administrative organization practice in Vietnam

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**Abstract:** *In the Vietnamese administrative system, the terms “department” (cuc), “bureau” (vu), and “institute” (vien) are widely used to denote units under ministries; however, the boundaries of their functions and authority have not been consistently defined in practice. This article approaches these terms from a functional-institutional perspective, combining international comparative methods with an analysis of Vietnamese administrative practice. By examining and contrasting the organizational models of several countries, the study clarifies how advanced administrative systems distinguish among units responsible for policy formulation, administrative management and implementation, and research and advisory functions. Comparative findings indicate that, across the surveyed models, administrative terminology generally reflects each unit's functional nature clearly while minimizing overlap among areas of operation. Against this backdrop, the article discusses the manifestations of ambiguity among “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” within the Vietnamese administrative system, analyzes the institutional and historical causes, and proposes orientations for standardizing terminology in connection with administrative restructuring, in line with current regulations on the functions, duties, and organizational structures of ministries and ministerial-level agencies. The study contributes additional scientific grounds for improving the system of administrative terminology and enhancing the effectiveness of state governance in Viet Nam today.*

**Keywords:** “Departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes”; administrative terminology; public governance; administrative reform.

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## 1. Introduction

In the process of organizing and operating the state administrative apparatus, terminology serves not only as a means of designation but

also as a reflection of how functions, authority, and responsibilities are allocated among agencies, units, and organizations. In Vietnam, the terms “department” (cuc), “bureau” (vu), and “institute” (vien) have been used

consistently over a long period and are codified in numerous legal normative documents regulating the functions, tasks, and organizational structures of ministries and ministerial-level agencies (Government, 2014; 2016; 2020).

However, organizational practice indicates that inconsistencies persist between nomenclature and actual functions, particularly in the overlap among policy advisory roles, management-implementation functions, and research-consultative activities. In the context of administrative reform and the streamlining of the state apparatus, this issue calls for re-examination on a scientific basis, rather than being addressed merely through technical adjustments or ad hoc solutions. This article argues that, to clarify the conceptual content of the terms “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes,” they must be situated within a broader comparative framework and linked to standardized international administrative models.

## **2. Approach and research methodology**

### *2.1. Approach*

Studies on administrative organization are commonly conducted from legal, public management, or organizational science perspectives. Meanwhile, administrative terminology, understood as the crystallization of an agency’s functions, authority, and position within the administrative system, has not received commensurate scholarly attention. Several studies indicate that in developed administrative systems, the terminology used to designate agencies and units tends to reflect their core functions and governance roles quite directly (Peters, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Building upon this approach, the present article combines it with an international comparative method to examine the terms “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” not as isolated or merely formal concepts, but as units situated along a common functional spectrum of modern public governance. Their

meanings are shaped by institutional contexts, organizational models, and the specific management requirements of each country.

### *2.2. The international comparative method*

#### *(1) Objectives and methodological orientation*

In examining the administrative terms “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes,” the international comparative method is employed to clarify the functional nature, authority, and organizational position of equivalent units within the administrative systems of selected countries. On that basis, the study seeks to establish a scientific foundation for identifying the semantic boundaries among these terms within Vietnam’s administrative system.

The comparative method does not aim to identify formal equivalence in nomenclature. Rather, it focuses on analyzing the functional-institutional meaning of each type of administrative unit within its specific national context. Under this approach, the terms “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” are examined in relation to typical administrative organizational models, thereby clarifying similarities, differences, and manifestations of overlap or deviation in their practical use in Vietnam.

#### *(2) Basis for selecting comparative models*

Five countries were selected for comparison: the United Kingdom, France, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Australia. These countries represent distinct administrative traditions, forming a representative and diverse comparative spectrum.

The United Kingdom and Australia exemplify the Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition and the Westminster model, characterized by a relatively clear separation between policy formulation and implementation, as well as a trend toward agencification in public governance. Agencification refers to the organizational tendency to separate policy implementation, specialized management functions, or public service delivery from central ministries and assign them to specialized agencies with a

certain degree of autonomy in organization, personnel, and finance, while remaining accountable for performance outcomes. This trend is associated with public management reforms since the late twentieth century, particularly within the framework of New Public Management, aiming to enhance implementation efficiency and clarify the boundary between policy formulation and execution (Peters, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; OECD, 2019).

France represents the continental Napoleonic administrative tradition, which has historically exerted significant influence on Vietnam's administrative organization. Meanwhile, Japan and the Republic of Korea exemplify modern East Asian administrative models, where administrative terminology is highly standardized and closely aligned with a clearly stratified functional hierarchy within the state apparatus.

The selection of these models enables the study to avoid a linear comparative approach while facilitating the identification of both universal patterns and cultural-institutional specificities in the organization and designation of administrative agencies and units.

### *(3) Comparative criteria framework*

The international comparison in this study is conducted using a unified set of criteria to ensure consistency and comparability across national models and among different types of administrative units.

*First*, the criterion of organizational position is employed to determine whether a unit functions as a policy advisory body, an administrative executive agency, or a research-consultative institution; it also examines the degree of direct subordination to a minister or the level of organizational and operational autonomy.

*Second*, the criterion of functional scope focuses on distinguishing among policy formulation, coordination and management, administrative implementation, and scientific research functions, and on the extent to which

these functions are combined within a single unit.

*Third*, the criterion of legal authority is assessed through indicators such as legal personality, the power to issue administrative decisions, the scope of budgetary and personnel management, and the degree of accountability to superior authorities under prevailing legal regulations.

*Finally*, the criterion of organizational structure and stability is applied to evaluate a unit's durability within the administrative apparatus and its capacity to restructure in response to reform requirements or political cycles.

This set of criteria enables administrative terminology to be examined not only at the linguistic level but also at the institutional and functional levels, thereby providing a scientific basis for comparing and standardizing its use in the organization of the state administrative apparatus.

## **3. "Departments," "bureaus," and "institutes" in the Vietnamese administrative model and a comparison with selected international models**

### *3.1. "Departments," "bureaus," and "institutes" in the Vietnamese administrative model*

Within Vietnam's administrative system at the ministerial and ministerial-level agency tiers, organizational units are primarily divided into three types: departments, bureaus, and institutes. Although all are specialized units subordinate to ministries or ministerial-level agencies, each type is designated by a distinct term and associated with different positions, functions, tasks, and powers. These differences reflect not only functional differentiation within the modern administrative apparatus but also historical development and institutional adaptation over time.

In the current system of legal normative documents, the terms "departments," "bureaus," and "institutes" are clearly defined in terms of legal status, functions, and authority,

reflecting a functional stratification within the state administrative apparatus.

According to Government Decree No. 123/2016/ND-CP dated September 1, 2016 and related decrees, a department is an organization under a ministry or a general department, tasked with performing specialized state management functions or sector-based management. A department possesses legal personality, its own seal, and an independent account; it has the authority to issue specialized documents within the Minister's delegation. Among the three types examined, the department constitutes the institution with the strongest and most direct state management authority, encompassing activities such as law enforcement, inspections, licensing, sanctioning of administrative violations, and sectoral management. From a semantic and stylistic perspective, the term "department" carries a distinctively administrative connotation, signifying a high degree of managerial authority and professional specialization, comparable in many administrative systems to departments or administrations.

In contrast, under Decree No. 123/2016/ND-CP, a bureau is a unit within a ministry or general department whose primary function is policy advisory and general coordination. A bureau does not possess legal personality, nor does it have its own seal or independent account. It does not directly exercise state management functions but instead plays a role in policy formulation, drafting legal normative documents, and developing strategies, master plans, and sectoral plans. In stylistic terms, "bureau" is a formal administrative designation oriented toward advisory rather than executive functions, typically associated with areas such as legal affairs, personnel organization, and planning-finance. Semantically, the term clearly denotes a policy advisory and coordinating function at the core of ministerial operations, rather than a direct specialized management authority.

With respect to the term "institute," current legislation distinguishes two principal types: research institutes subordinate to ministries and those under the Government or ministerial-level agencies. Pursuant to Government Decree No. 101/2020/ND-CP dated August 28 2020, an institute is a public non-business unit possessing legal personality, its own seal, and an independent account, but not performing state management functions. Its mandate includes scientific research, strategic analysis, policy consultation, and the provision of scientific grounds for management activities. From a stylistic and semantic standpoint, "institute" carries a pronounced academic and research-oriented connotation; its administrative authority is significantly lower than that of a department, and it does not directly engage in inspection, licensing, or sanctioning activities. In practice, institutes are often regarded as ministerial or governmental "think tanks."

In summary, within Vietnam's administrative system, the three terms "departments," "bureaus," and "institutes" belong to the broader semantic field of administrative and public service organizations, yet differ clearly in legal substance and scope of authority. A department is a direct state management unit with strong administrative power; a bureau is a policy advisory body that plays a strategic and coordinating role; and an institute is a research and strategic advisory institution that provides scientific foundations for decision-making. From a linguistic perspective, the distinction is reflected in the administrative-authority connotation of "department," the advisory-policy orientation of "bureau," and the academic-research character of "institute," indicating that these terms are not interchangeable in state administrative documents.

### *3.2. Comparison with equivalent units in selected international administrative models*

#### *(1) The United Kingdom administrative model*

Within the administrative system of the United Kingdom, entities such as directorates, departmental units, executive agencies, and think tanks are organized around a relatively clear functional separation (Martin, 2012). A directorate is a functional unit within a ministry or central authority, primarily responsible for policy advice, policy development, and coordination. It is broadly comparable to a bureau in Vietnam's administrative system; however, in ministries where a directorate is large in scale and broad in authority, it may in some respects approximate a department.

A departmental unit is a generic designation for internal units within a ministry, emphasizing hierarchical subordination rather than specific functions; consequently, it lacks a stable equivalent in Vietnamese. An executive agency is established to implement policy and deliver public services, operating with a certain degree of autonomy and relative managerial separation from the ministry. Functionally, this type bears considerable similarity to a department in Vietnam, although it is not entirely equivalent in institutional position.

By contrast, a think tank is an independent or semi-independent research organization that conducts studies, analyses, and policy recommendations to advise the Government. It is not an administrative body and does not directly implement. This structure demonstrates that in the Anglo-Saxon model, policy formulation, implementation, and research-advisory functions are separated with notable clarity.

### (2) *The French administrative model*

In the French central administrative system, entities such as *direction*, *direction générale*, *service*, *institut*, and *établissement public* are clearly stratified by function and authority (OECD, 2012). A *direction* is a basic functional unit within a ministry, responsible for policy advice, drafting regulatory instruments, and coordinating implementation. It is relatively close to a bureau in Vietnam, although in certain cases it may also assume specialized

management functions comparable to a department.

At a higher level, a *direction générale* exercises broader managerial scope and greater authority, combining strategic advisory roles with sector-wide coordination of implementation. It approximates a general department or a large department in Vietnam. A *service* is a subordinate unit responsible primarily for specific technical or administrative tasks, roughly equivalent to a division or office in the Vietnamese administrative structure.

An *institut* generally refers to a scientific research body, policy advisory institution, or specialized training organization with an academic and professional orientation rather than a purely administrative character. An *établissement public* is a distinct public legal entity established by the State to perform public tasks, such as research, education, public service provision, or specialized technical management, and enjoys a relatively high degree of autonomy while remaining subject to state supervision. This model allows for a relatively clear delineation between administrative management bodies and research or public-service institutions.

### (3) *The Japanese administrative model*

In Japan's administrative system, entities such as *kyoku* (局), *ka* (課), and *kenkyūjo* (研究所) are organized in a strictly hierarchical functional order (OECD, 2025). A *kyoku* is a major specialized management bureau responsible for policy coordination and implementation, closely corresponding to a department in Vietnam. Beneath the *kyoku*, *ka* units handle more specific and operational tasks, equivalent to division-level units.

A *kenkyūjo*, by contrast, is clearly defined as a research institute and does not combine administrative management functions. The Japanese model demonstrates a close alignment between terminology and function, minimizing overlap or ambiguity in the organization and use of administrative terms.

*(4) The Korean administrative model*

The administrative system of the Republic of Korea clearly distinguishes among bureaus (guk), divisions (gwa), and research institutes (Kim, 2022). A bureau is a key unit within a ministry, responsible for a relatively broad policy or management domain, exercising specialized management, coordination, and supervisory functions. In terms of position and role, it is broadly comparable to a department in Vietnam.

Under the bureau, divisions undertake more specific and highly specialized tasks, directly participating in detailed policy drafting and administrative implementation. Meanwhile, a research institute is a specialized organization devoted to scientific research, analysis, and policy advice, typically possessing independent or semi-independent legal status and operating with a high degree of autonomy. It does not perform routine administrative management functions and is substantively equivalent to an institute in its research-advisory sense within Vietnam's system.

The Korean model underscores the importance of a clear legal framework in ensuring the consistency and transparency of administrative terminology.

*(5) The Australian administrative model*

Australia's administrative system clearly reflects the trend toward agencification, in which implementation functions are separated from ministries through statutory and executive agencies (OECD, 2017). A statutory agency is established directly by an Act of Parliament, possesses independent legal personality, and has clearly defined statutory functions and powers. It enjoys a high degree of autonomy in organization, personnel, and finance, and typically undertakes sectoral management, regulation, or large-scale public service delivery. Its relationship with the responsible minister is primarily one of oversight and strategic direction.

An executive agency, by contrast, is established by the Government or a minister to implement policies and deliver public services,

with a lower degree of autonomy and closer administrative ties to its parent ministry. Research entities within the Australian system generally operate independently from the central administrative apparatus or are affiliated with specialized research institutions, thereby highlighting the clear distinction among policy formulation, implementation, and research functions.

**4. Discussion and implications for administrative practice in Vietnam**

*4.1. Functional boundaries and issues of designation in the Vietnamese administrative system*

In Vietnam's administrative practice, the ambiguity among the terms "departments," "bureaus," and "institutes" is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but reflects a systemic issue in institutional design and functional allocation at the central level. Although in certain specialized sectors the concurrent assignment of functions across different types of units may stem from technical management requirements or resource constraints, such exceptions do not alter the broader reality that functional boundaries among these units have not been clearly, consistently, and stably defined throughout the administrative system.

Notably, in various management domains, some research institutes under ministries perform not only scientific research and policy advisory functions but also participate directly in stages of the administrative management process. These activities include professional dossier appraisal, technical evaluation that serves as the basis for licensing decisions, participation in the formulation and guidance of mandatory standards and technical regulations, and even the direct implementation of management programs or projects. When the outputs of an institute carry direct legal validity and constitute a mandatory step within the administrative decision-making chain, the institute no longer functions solely as a research-advisory body but becomes directly involved in the execution of state management.

This practice is particularly evident in sectors such as construction and technical infrastructure, science and technology, and natural resources and environment. In these fields, many institutes are assigned responsibilities for technical appraisal, professional assessment, or expert evaluation that serve as legal grounds for project approval, recognition of research outcomes, licensing, or adjustments to environmental permits. Substantively, these are implementation-support activities closely tied to state management, exerting direct legal effects on the rights and obligations of relevant stakeholders, rather than remaining at the level of scientific recommendation or policy advice. The dual role of institutes conducting research while simultaneously undertaking management-oriented appraisal and evaluation blurs the boundary between institutes and departments and poses risks of role conflict and the erosion of scientific independence.

Under the 2025 Law on Science, Technology, and Innovation, science and technology organizations are primarily mandated to conduct scientific research, develop technologies, provide scientific and technological services, and undertake consultancy, social critique, and expert evaluation. The regular and mandatory involvement of research institutes in administrative management processes suggests a trend toward the administrativeization of research activities, which does not fully align with the legislatively defined distinction between state management functions and scientific activities.

From an international comparative perspective, particularly regarding the administrative models of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Australia, research institutes are typically designed to perform research, analysis, and policy review functions. They may contribute proposals or expert opinions, but do not form an integral part of the routine administrative implementation chain. In contrast, the Vietnamese practice indicates that

the boundaries among policy formulation, management implementation, and scientific research have not been sharply delineated. This constitutes a fundamental cause of the ambiguity in the designation and use of the terms “department,” “bureau,” and “institute,” and underscores the urgent need to review and standardize the functions and institutional positioning of each type of unit within the broader process of administrative reform and organizational restructuring.

#### *4.2. Causes of terminological and functional overlap*

From an international comparative perspective, the lack of clarity in the terminology and functions of “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” in Vietnam’s administrative practice can be attributed to several fundamental factors.

*First*, Vietnam’s administrative terminology has been historically influenced by multiple sources, particularly the French administrative tradition. However, the process of receiving and localizing these organizational models has not always preserved their original functional boundaries. As a result, there has emerged a phenomenon of “borrowing labels while transforming their substance,” whereby administrative terms no longer accurately reflect the actual functions and authority of the units concerned.

*Second*, amid expanding state management responsibilities and the increasing complexity of public governance issues, many units have been assigned additional tasks without corresponding adjustments to their organizational status or legal designation. This pattern of “expanding functions while retaining the original name” has blurred boundaries among different types of units, especially among advisory bodies, executive agencies, and research institutions.

*Finally*, although administrative reform in Vietnam has achieved notable progress, it has lacked a coherent theoretical framework and unified standards for standardizing

administrative organizational terminology in close alignment with function and authority, an approach that has been applied relatively consistently in countries such as the Republic of Korea and Australia. The absence of such a normative framework has limited transparency and institutional stability in the designation and organization of administrative units.

#### 4.3. *Confronting each term with Vietnamese administrative practice*

##### (1) *“Department” and specialized management and implementation functions*

Comparative analysis indicates that a department in Vietnam’s administrative system occupies a position broadly comparable to that of an executive agency in the United Kingdom, a bureau in the Republic of Korea, or a statutory agency in Australia, particularly in specialized management and policy implementation.

A notable distinction, however, is that Vietnamese department units generally remain fully embedded within the organizational structure of a ministry, with limited autonomy in organization, personnel, and finance under existing regulations on decentralization and organizational structure (Government, 2014; 2020).

In practice, when certain department units simultaneously perform state management functions and undertake technical tasks, public service provision, or applied research, the risk of functional overload increases. This situation also blurs the boundary between the department and the institute, especially when technical evaluation or applied expertise becomes intertwined with regulatory authority.

##### (2) *“Bureau” and policy advisory functions*

A comparison with policy units in the United Kingdom or ka units in the Japanese administrative model suggests that, in principle, a bureau should be defined as a specialized policy advisory body responsible for legislative drafting and sectoral strategic planning. In Vietnam’s administrative system, this role has been formally established in legal

documents governing state organizational structures (Government, 2020).

In practice, however, many bureau units remain deeply involved in executive coordination, inspection activities, and even implementation. If not carefully circumscribed, this functional expansion risks diluting the core mission of the bureau, namely, policy design and strategic thinking, while creating overlaps with departments, which are institutionally intended to assume specialized management and implementation responsibilities.

##### (3) *“Institute” and research-advisory functions*

From a comparative standpoint, an institute should primarily operate as a research and policy advisory institution, analogous to research institutes in Japan and the Republic of Korea, or to independent analytical bodies in Australia. Its principal mission is to conduct scientific research, strategic analysis, and evidence-based policy consultation, rather than to exercise administrative authority or participate directly in routine management processes.

International experience indicates that research units within administrative systems are typically organized with a relative degree of independence and rarely participate directly in routine administrative management activities. In contrast, in Vietnam, many ministerial research institutes not only conduct scientific research and provide policy advice but also draft regulatory documents, conduct professional appraisals, and undertake specific management tasks. This phenomenon reflects a tendency toward the administrativeization of research activities that does not fully align with the distinction between scientific research and state management functions established in the 2025 Law on Science, Technology, and Innovation (National Assembly, 2025). This represents a notable divergence from the administrative models of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Australia, where research-advisory roles are generally clearly separated from the administrative implementation chain.

#### *4.4. Implications for public governance and administrative reform*

The ambiguity in terminology and functions among “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” extends beyond nomenclature and organizational structure and has significant consequences for the effectiveness of public governance and the administrative reform process.

*First*, the lack of clearly delineated functions and authority increases the risk of overlapping mandates among units, leading to fragmented responsibility, prolonged processing times, and weakened internal coordination within the state administrative apparatus. When multiple units participate in similar task chains without clearly defined lead roles, accountability becomes diffuse and difficult to ascertain.

*Second*, inconsistencies in designation and functional allocation may directly affect the quality of policy formulation and implementation. Units designed to perform policy advisory roles risk being drawn into executive or operational activities, while research-advisory bodies may find it difficult to exercise independent critical analysis if embedded too deeply within routine administrative mechanisms. As a result, policy formulation may lack strategic analytical depth, and scientific research may become increasingly administrative in character.

*Finally*, from the perspective of administrative reform, the absence of standardized organizational terminology closely aligned with function and authority may impede efforts to and efficiency. When the boundaries among advisory, executive, and research functions are not clearly defined, organizational consolidation or restructuring initiatives risk remaining superficial, falling short of substantive reform objectives, and failing to align with advanced public governance practices.

#### *4.5. Insights from international comparison for Vietnamese administrative practice*

Based on the foregoing comparative analysis, several general observations may be

drawn regarding prevailing trends in the organizational structures of advanced administrative systems, offering potential directions for reform in Vietnam. These recommendations are not intended to replicate or impose foreign models, but rather to selectively apply broadly recognized organizational principles in a manner consistent with Vietnam’s institutional context and reform objectives.

*First*, the terms “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” should be understood in terms of their actual functional substance and authority rather than historical naming conventions or organizational habits. Adjustments to organizational nomenclature should be closely aligned with corresponding changes in functions and powers or vice versa to ensure coherence between designation and operational content.

*Second*, clearer separation should be reinforced among policy formulation, management-implementation, and research-advisory functions, particularly by safeguarding the relative independence of research units. This principle is a common feature of the surveyed administrative models and contributes to improving policy quality, reducing role conflicts, and preventing the administrativeization of scientific research.

*Third*, the standardization of administrative organizational terminology should be embedded within a unified legal framework at the central level, as in countries such as the Republic of Korea. Such a framework should explicitly define the relationship among terminology, function, and authority, thereby ensuring consistency, transparency, and institutional stability across the entire administrative system.

Overall, compared with international administrative models, Vietnam’s current “department-bureau-institute” structure still shows significant gaps between formal designations and actual functions. The overlap among advisory, executive, and research functions not only undermines organizational

effectiveness but also underscores the urgent need to standardize administrative terminology as part of broader institutional reform. In particular, the administrativeization of research institutes and the deep involvement of certain bureau units in operational activities reveal limitations in functional differentiation, a feature uncommon in the advanced administrative models examined.

The comparative findings demonstrate that situating the terms “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” within a broader analytical framework helps clarify core issues regarding functional boundaries and designations in Vietnam’s administrative system. This, in turn, may inform efforts to review, reorganize, and streamline the apparatus to improve its effectiveness and efficiency. For example, bureau units with similar functions may be consolidated; in sectors that require specialized management and intensive implementation capacity, a transformation from a bureau to a department model may be considered. Such adjustments, if grounded in functional analysis and terminological standardization, would enhance the effectiveness of the state administrative apparatus in the ongoing reform process.

#### *4.6. Institutional conditions for applying comparative insights in Vietnam*

References to the administrative models of the United Kingdom, France, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Australia are not intended as mechanical transplantation but are meaningful only when situated within Vietnam’s specific institutional conditions. In this context, international comparison serves as a diagnostic and heuristic tool rather than as a ready-made organizational template.

*First*, a prerequisite condition is the establishment of a unified and stable legal framework governing the allocation of functions among ministerial units. Any structural adjustment must be accompanied by corresponding revisions to mandates, powers, and legal responsibilities, thereby avoiding

changes in nomenclature or organizational form without substantive clarification of functional content. Only when the relationship among designation, function, and authority is consistently codified can the standardization of administrative terminology rest on a sustainable foundation.

*Second*, a clear mechanism of decentralization and delegation, coupled with well-defined accountability arrangements, must be instituted to ensure that the separation among policy formulation, management-implementation, and research-advisory functions is substantive rather than merely formal. Without effective checks on power and mechanisms for responsibility assessment, functional differentiation may easily be undermined in practice.

*Third*, adequate human and financial resources constitute a decisive condition for the effective application of comparative insights. Standardizing terminology and organizational structures can yield tangible benefits only when civil servants and relevant units possess sufficient professional capacity to perform their assigned functions properly. Absent such capacity, organizational reform risks becoming a case of “correct in name but not in practice,” thereby weakening rather than strengthening governance effectiveness.

In this context, comparative insights can generate meaningful value only if applied flexibly, selectively, and in alignment with Vietnam’s institutional traditions, developmental level, and reform priorities. Such an approach enables the incorporation of progressive organizational principles from modern public governance while avoiding superficial imitation and ensuring the feasibility and sustainability of administrative restructuring efforts.

#### *4.7. Methodological significance*

The results of the international comparison yield several important methodological implications for the study of administrative organization.

*First*, in advanced administrative systems, the boundaries among policy formulation, management-implementation, and research-advisory functions are generally delineated with relative clarity, and administrative terminology directly reflects this functional differentiation. Terminology thus serves not merely as a label but as a condensed expression of the administrative apparatus's underlying power structure and operational logic.

*Second*, research entities corresponding to “institute” in the Vietnamese context are rarely organized as purely administrative components embedded within a ministry’s implementation chain. Instead, they typically enjoy a certain degree of autonomy or operate as semi-independent bodies. This suggests that equating research institutes with administrative management agencies, or assigning them routine management tasks, is not common in comparative practice. It also raises questions regarding the institutional appropriateness of such arrangements in the Vietnamese context.

*Third*, the international comparative method provides a scientific basis for affirming that a “bureau” is fundamentally a policy advisory unit; a “department” is a specialized management and implementation body; and a “institute” is a research and policy advisory institution. The overlap or ambiguity among these terms in organizational practice is not an inherent characteristic of public governance but rather reflects limitations in institutional perception and design, particularly when contrasted with existing legal provisions governing the allocation of functions among ministerial units in Vietnam (Government, 2016; 2020).

Overall, the international comparative method, grounded in a functional and institutional approach, has proven to be an effective analytical tool for examining the administrative terms “department,” “bureau,” and “institute.” It not only clarifies their meaning within the Vietnamese context but also provides a scientific foundation for discussions on terminological standardization

and administrative organizational reform in the broader context of international integration and the modernization of public governance.

## 5. Conclusion

This study approaches the terms “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” not merely as administrative labels but as units embodying specific functional and institutional content, formed, operated, and transformed within distinct administrative contexts. Through the international comparative method, the article situates Vietnam’s administrative terminology within a broader analytical framework that encompasses representative administrative models from the United Kingdom, France, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Australia.

The comparative findings indicate that in advanced administrative systems, organizational terminology generally reflects, with relative clarity, the division into three core functional domains: policy formulation, management and implementation, and research and advisory activities. Although institutional traditions shape different structural expressions, a common feature is the effort to minimize functional overlap and terminological ambiguity. In particular, research entities are rarely organized as purely administrative components embedded within the state management chain.

Against this background, the organization and use of the “department-bureau-institute” structure in Vietnam reveal notable discrepancies between designations, functions, and authorities. The involvement of certain bureau units in operational and implementation activities, the assignment of multiple non-core functions to departments, and the administrativeization of research institutes all suggest that functional boundaries have not been consistently and clearly defined. This issue extends beyond terminology and reflects broader limitations in organizational thinking and in the standardization of the state administrative apparatus.

It should be emphasized that the ambiguities among “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” identified in this study reflect a systemic trend within the current organizational structure, notwithstanding sector-specific or historically conditioned exceptions. Recognizing this systemic pattern is significant, as it enables reform to be oriented at the institutional level rather than confined to isolated, case-by-case adjustments.

From a methodological perspective, the study affirms the value of a function- and institution-based international comparative approach in clarifying the meaning of administrative terminology. This approach moves beyond purely formal comparison and provides a scientific basis for redefining the substantive content of “departments,” “bureaus,” and “institutes” within Vietnam’s administrative system. Accordingly, a “bureau” should primarily be identified as a policy advisory unit; a “department” as a specialized management and implementation body; and a “institute” as a research and policy advisory institution requiring a relative degree of independence, consistent with the principles of functional allocation established in current Vietnamese legislation (National Assembly, 2013; Government, 2016; 2020).

In practical terms, the study suggests that standardizing administrative organizational terminology should be embedded within a comprehensive reform framework, closely linked to the restructuring of functions and authority, rather than limited to nomenclature adjustments. The international comparison undertaken herein does not seek to impose external models but rather to provide scientifically grounded reference points that may assist Vietnam in critically evaluating and refining its administrative organizational system in the ongoing process of reform and international integration.

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