

LIVING AUTONOMY OF ETHIOPIAN PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES: THE CASE OF JIMMA UNIVERSITY

MESAY GERBI BOGALE
JEILU OUMER HUSSIEN
Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the practice of institutional autonomy at Jimma University in Ethiopia. The study employed a mixed approach by collecting research data through a questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and document analysis. Two hundred and thirty-two randomly selected instructors and academic leaders were contacted through the questionnaire, and nine purposively selected informants were interviewed. The quantitative data were analyzed by using mean values, standard deviations, and independent sample t-tests, while the qualitative data were examined by identifying common codes and emerging themes. The findings indicated that organizational, academic, and financial autonomy practices were lower than formal autonomy. On the other hand, staff autonomy was relatively at a medium level, and the overall practice of institutional autonomy at Jimma University was poor. Thus, living autonomy was found to be different from formal autonomy. The study also found that the influence of the internal and external environment might contribute to the divergence. As a result, legal provisions could not guarantee the university's living autonomy, but the relationship between the environment and the university does. Therefore, in exercising university autonomy, educational leaders and managers should take the interface between the university and its environment into account.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the importance of institutional autonomy in higher education institutions has gained global attention. Higher education institutions acknowledge that institutional autonomy, a crucial component of governance, significantly influences their decision-making and overall operations. When given the freedom and flexibility to adapt, institutions can effectively respond to the changing requirements and expectations of their stakeholders. In addition, they strengthen their role in their contribution to the sustainable development of the nation.

According to Levacic (2002), university autonomy is one of the requirements for higher education institutions to be effective and efficient. To respond more quickly to external challenges, address social and economic needs, and manage resources in a more strategic, efficient, and effective way, higher education institutions need autonomy - the ability to independently shape their governance structures within established accountability frameworks.

Enders et al. (2013) provide a comprehensive understanding of autonomy by illustrating two dimensions. First, it refers to the institution's self-capacity, highlighting its ability to act independently and make decisions based on its internal resources and expertise. Second, autonomy also pertains to the institution's relationship with its external environment, emphasizing its independence and freedom from external control or undue influence. Hence, Enders and his coauthors indicated that institutional autonomy should be understood from both perspectives.

Furthermore, Pruvot and Estermann (2017) described operational freedom and the ability to choose the framework and structure of the decision-making process as examples of institutional autonomy that comprises organizational autonomy, academic autonomy, staff autonomy, and financial autonomy. In this article, "formal autonomy" refers to the legal framework of autonomy

granted by the state through policies, rules, and regulations; "living autonomy" refers to the exercise of the legal framework's granted autonomy.

As noted by Shaw (2018), although the policy documents have been articulated to establish autonomous public universities in the four perspectives since the imperial regime, this initiative was suspended during the Derg regime in Ethiopia. The present government, as repeatedly stated in various legislation, policy, and strategic plan documents, has consistently expressed its commitment to developing autonomous and accountable public higher education institutions with a specific focus on universities (the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2019, 2023).

Despite the government's efforts to ensure the institutional autonomy of such universities, there is a difference between formal and living autonomy (Saint, 2009). Several aspects of the internal and external environment in which universities function may construct a distinction between what the legal framework states and what the universities practice.

We selected Jimma University as a study sample to assess the living autonomy of higher education institutions. Evaluating the institutional autonomy, both living and formal, at this research university provides valuable insights for other public universities. Thus, this study intends to examine the status of institutional autonomy and identify the rationales for the divergence of formal and living autonomy in public universities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Perspectives on Institutional Autonomy

The conceptualization of institutional autonomy necessitates an understanding of autonomy's essence. In this regard, a wide range of scholars have provided numerous definitions for the idea of autonomy. The conventional definition of autonomy is self-steering or ruling, wherein organizations have the freedom to select the rules and regulations they believe to be useful and to exercise their judgment and initiative (Bain, 2003; Ballou, 1998; de Boer & Enders, 2017; Pizanti & Lerner, 2003; Verhoest et al., 2004). The above definition concentrates on two concepts: protection and actionability. The first is the absence of coercive techniques or the freedom from external intervention, and the ability to make decisions without interference. The second one, which is the ability to act, is concerned with a person's choices, desires, and abilities to use those choices and abilities to control her/his surroundings. This comprises the tools, guidance, and interpersonal support required to genuinely weigh options and reach judgments (Verhoest et al., 2004). On the other hand, there are two aspects to autonomy: interactions within and between the outside worlds. Inward interaction demonstrates how much an entity's environment allows it to govern itself, whereas outward interaction represents an entity's capacity and ability to react to external forces. As a result, we describe the notion of autonomy in terms of proclaimed independence (formal autonomy) and the capacity for thought. In the same vein, Sarpong (2021) pointed out that while universities may have autonomy granted to them through official policies and regulations, the actual implementation and exercise of that autonomy does not always match the formal, stated autonomy.

In describing institutional autonomy, scholars in the area offered many explanations from the perspectives of many dimensions. Berdahl (1990) was the first to characterize autonomy in higher education in terms of its multifaceted nature. He made a distinction between procedural autonomy, which he refers to as the procedures or structures that assist organizations in pursuing their objective (the "how" of the mission), and substantive autonomy, which he refers to as deciding the "what" of the mission. Even though he did not properly define the variables, his attempt (at least) to partition the general concept into two important dimensions is beneficial. Although Berdahl made a significant contribution to our knowledge of university autonomy, his formulation does not

clearly distinguish between features of substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy. Moreover, the categorization of the dimensions was unclear when analyzing the two aspects. For example, although the university views instructors as a component of its substantive autonomy, its primary function is not to hire professors.

Since 2009, the European University Association (EUA) has also been attempting to create a scorecard for institutional autonomy that helps highlight the components of institutional autonomy and substantive autonomy. Presently, European universities use the scorecard as a guide for describing university autonomy (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). The EUA university autonomy scorecard, however, has drawn criticism for its approach to data collection and indicator development (Nokkala & Bladh, 2014). Despite these drawbacks, it outlines the metrics under its four (organizational, academic, financial, and staff) dimensions of university autonomy, which are easy to comprehend.

Besides, Maassen et al. (2017) found that the dimensions of university autonomy are influenced by the specific context and ideological views of a given state. This is because institutional autonomy is a relative and relational concept - it describes how universities interact with their environment, government authorities, their stakeholders, and broader society. This perspective is based on formal institutional autonomy.

In summary, universities' institutional autonomy could be better conceptualized by explicitly describing its dimensions in a detailed manner. The EUA scorecard's formulation of autonomy dimensions provides better insights when compared to Berdahl's categorization. Moreover, the EUA dimensions provide an understanding of the essence of the concept by contextualizing the operations. Besides, living autonomy encompasses not only an understanding of its dimensions but also the universities' ability to implement these elements and the impact of environmental factors.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

To meet the demand for skilled labor for a nation's economic transformation, higher education institutions play an irreplaceable role. The important issue is how to raise higher education institutions' productivity so that they develop into inventive and creative businesses, to which enhancing their governance systems contributes a lot.

To improve the governance system of public higher education institutions, Ethiopia has tried several policy reforms. Teshome (2007) pointed out that, despite the government's multiple attempts and efforts for more than two decades to establish effective governance systems in Ethiopian public higher education institutions, the practices of institutional autonomy were not encouraging.

Numerous studies on the governance of higher education institutions, including Gebru (2013), Tamrat and Teferra (2018), Woldegiyorgis (2014), and Gebru, Hondeghem, and Broucke (2020) found that institutional autonomy is quite poor. Furthermore, according to Dabi (2015) and Yohannes (2010), Ethiopian public universities continue to face difficulties due to the erosion of institutional autonomy brought on by poor policy implementation. Studies also showed that government interference in the decision-making process minimizes the institutions' self-reliance. For example, Gebru, Hondeghem, and Broucke (2020), who assessed the institutional autonomy level of Mekelle University using the EUAS tool, found that institutional autonomy was low due to the interferences.

On the other hand, studies conducted on the living autonomy of Ethiopian public universities so far are uncommon or insufficient (de Boer & Enders, 2017). For example, Lebata (2022) conducted a case study on institutional autonomy from the perspectives of formal and de facto (living) autonomy at Adama Science and Technology University and concluded that de facto

autonomy is distinct from formal autonomy as the result of numerous environmental pressures like market and community perspectives, political influence, and excessive resource dependence.

Other local studies that include Lerra (2019), Yohannes (2010), Kassahun (2015), Lerra and Omer (2017), Gebru (2013), Tamrat and Teferra (2018), Woldegiyorgis (2014), and Gebru et al. (2020) are primarily concerned with the governance structure of higher education as a whole or the level of institutional autonomy and accountability. These studies fail to conduct in-depth investigations on the influence of the public research university environment (internal and external) and the discrepancy between the formal autonomy provided by the legal framework and the actual practices (living autonomy). However, analyzing the reasons behind these differences can shed light on the current state of institutional autonomy in the governance of higher education institutions. Therefore, this study is focused on examining the current state of institutional autonomy and the reasons behind its deviation from the legal guarantees found in higher education governance legislation and policy guidance. It investigated institutional autonomy from the perspective of the four dimensions of autonomy: organizational autonomy, academic autonomy, financial autonomy, and staff autonomy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What aspects of institutional autonomy does Jimma University exercise?
2. To what extent does Jimma University exercise the different aspects of institutional autonomy?
3. What aspects of the environmental factors affect the exercise of institutional autonomy at Jimma University?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a pragmatic worldview that allows the use of a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design to assess the current state and the influence of its environment on living autonomy at Jimma University. The mixed method allows the use of both quantitative and qualitative data. In this study, the values and knowledge gained from both types of data were useful in developing a holistic picture of the up-to-date state of living autonomy in the university. It is also less time-consuming because both qualitative and quantitative data collection occurs concurrently during the same visit to the field (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012). Moreover, by merging the characteristics of the quantitative and qualitative traditions, mixed-methods research provides answers to questions that cannot be answered with a single method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Research Participants

Jimma University, categorized as a research university by the Ministry of Education of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, was purposively selected as a sample institution for this study for several reasons. One reason is the willingness of the principals of the university to take part in the study. The second reason is that it was found to be convenient for the researchers due to the fact it is accessible through alternative transportation facilities (travel/flight). The other cause is that a similar investigation had not been conducted at the university before.

Sampling Techniques

Multi-stage sampling method was employed to select academic leaders (deans, department heads) and academic staff (instructors). First, colleges, schools, faculties, and departments were selected using simple random sampling, and then academic leaders and instructors were drawn using the same technique. On the other hand, a purposive sampling technique was used to select two senior professors, a finance director, a human resources director, a college dean, two vice presidents, and two senior experts on institutional autonomy from the Ministry of Education for interview participants. These interviewees were selected because of their position and experience in the university. These participants were given codes to make the discussion of qualitative data impersonal. Accordingly, labels (JU1, JU2, JU3, JU4, JU5, JU6, JU7, JU8, and JU9) were assigned respectively.

Research Instruments

This study gathered data by using a self-designed questionnaire, semi-structured interview questions, and document analysis. The questionnaire is composed of three sections: respondents' demographic background, instructors' and leaders' perceptions of institutional autonomy practice, and respondents' opinions on the effect of internal and external environments on the realization of legally provided autonomy. These closed-ended items were five-point Likert scales where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

The content validity of the items was approved by two experts in the area, both of whom were from the Educational Planning and Management Department in the College of Education and Behavioral Studies at Addis Ababa University. Likewise, the inter-item reliability analysis of each questionnaire scale (as indicated in Table 1) exceeds Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7 showing better consistency.

Table 1
Reliability of Constructs

Constructs	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Organizational Autonomy	11	.885
Academic Autonomy	18	.924
Financial Autonomy	10	.898
Staff Autonomy	7	.918

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to determine the construct validity of institutional autonomy and reveal the factor structure. We used principal components and direct oblimin rotation methods for this analysis. The reason for this is that the principal component method is the most frequently and easily used method in practice, and the direct oblimin rotation method is used when it is considered that there is a relationship between factors.

Initially, it was found that the Kasier-Meyer-Olikin (KMO) sample adequacy value was 0.899, indicating that the sample size was sufficient for exploratory factor analysis. According to Field (2009), this value is deemed sufficient when it is above 0.50 and classified in the "excellent" category between 0.80-0.90. We also found that the KMO values calculated for each item were the lowest, at 0.82, confirming that the sample was sufficient. In addition, as a result of Bartlett's test, $p < 0.05$ and its finding showed that the correlations between the items were large enough for EFA.

The EFA revealed that institutional autonomy comprised 46 items with 4 sub-dimensions

(factors), accounting for 71.02% of the total variance. This led to the conclusion that institutional autonomy was a valid feature. We determined the factor loads to have the lowest value, 0.606. Therefore, Field (2009) accepted factor loads of 0.40 and above as ideal, indicating that the items significantly contributed to the factors. The factors identified were organizational, academic, financial, and staff autonomy.

The qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interview guide questions derived from the research questions. The questions were designed to gather information on the realization of institutional autonomy, encompassing its essence, practice, challenges, and impact on the university's internal and external environments. In addition, document analysis was employed. Documents such as education policies, higher education proclamations, autonomous university proclamations, education sector development plans, Jimma University legislation, and various procedures were analyzed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data were collected in December 2023 concurrently. The return rate of the questionnaire was 92.8%. The quantitative raw data were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24, where we performed further transformations. Descriptive statistics like frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation, and inferential statistics like the independent sample t-test were calculated. The results were presented in tables. On the other hand, interviews were conducted at the interviewee's convenience, with an average duration of one hour and thirty minutes per interview. The data were then transcribed and grouped under themes that were aligned with the research questions. The qualitative data also underwent content and thematic analyses in an inductive approach. The results were presented using both direct and indirect quotes. The simultaneous presentation of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed the beauty of the two forms of information, projecting a concrete and vivid account of the issues under investigation. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data results were triangulated by identifying the points of convergence and divergence, integrating the findings, and lastly interpreting and presenting the results to answer the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study involved interacting with human beings, the study adhered strictly to the ethical protocols for data collection and analysis. The researchers communicated with concerned bodies of all administrative levels from the Ministry of Education through the university's president's office to the target colleges, schools, institutes, and offices to elicit participants who were willing to provide information. The participants were assured about the confidentiality of their responses and that the information they provided would be solely used for academic purposes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

A larger proportion of the study participants were male, 186 (80.2%), and largely 180 (77.6%) were aged between 31 and 50 years old. The majority of the participants' work experience ranges from 6 to 15 years. About 93.5% of the respondents hold second and third-degree, while respondents with lecturer and assistant professor academic rank constituted 90.5% of the sample. Thus, these diverse demographic characteristics of the participants may indicate that the data obtained from them would be representative.

Autonomy is a complex concept from a higher education perspective. We followed the four dimensions mentioned earlier to simplify its assessment and analysis. These dimensions: organizational, academic, financial, and staff autonomy were used to assess the living institutional autonomy at Jimma University.

Organizational Autonomy

Organizational autonomy refers to universities' independence in selection procedures for the executive head, dismissal of the executive head, term of office of the executive head, inclusion and selection of external board members, and capacity to decide on organizational structure (Estermann et al., 2011). Table 2 presents the perceptions of university instructors and academic leaders, based on this concept and the institutional autonomy legally granted to Jimma University by Higher Education Proclamation number 1152/2019.

As indicated in Table 2, most respondents did not think Jimma University had a lot of freedom to do things like choosing its president and vice presidents, running public ads for presidential recruitments, replacing vice presidents when their terms ended, selecting voting board members, and setting up its organizational structure (with an overall mean score of 2.08). Both groups of respondents, instructors (mean 2.12) and academic leaders (mean 1.95), rated similarly. Furthermore, the table showed a slight deviation from the respective mean value among respondents' perceptions of organizational autonomy indicators (see standard deviation values, which are about 0.71). Thus, respondents view the exercise of organizational autonomy as low, without much dispersion of responses from the mean score.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variable

Variables	Respondents								
	Instructors			Academic Leaders			Total		
	N	Mean	Std. D	N	Mean	Std. D	N	Mean	Std. D
Organizational	178	2.12	0.71	54	1.95	0.68	232	2.08	0.71
Academic	178	2.09	0.66	54	2.07	0.68	232	2.09	0.66
Financial	178	2.3	0.80	54	2.18	0.59	232	2.28	0.76
Staff	178	2.65	0.80	54	2.57	0.95	232	2.63	0.99
Institutional	178	2.29	0.63	54	2.19	0.52	232	2.29	0.61

NB: Mean < 2.5 = low; mean ≥ 2.5 and < 3.5 = medium; and mean ≥ 3.5 = high; N = 232.
Source: own field data collected in 2024.

The qualitative data collected through unstructured interviews with key respondents also confirmed the results of the quantitative data. The majority of the interview participants highlighted the inapplicability of the legal framework in real contexts. Almost all of the interview respondents agreed that the board members' nominations and assignments came from the government, and the university's organizational structure also comes from the same source - the Ministry of Education or the Federal Civil Service Commission. The interview participants believe their contribution in this regard is very limited. A university professor explained his view as:

We heard the names of the university board members from the university announcement, and we believe that they were given by the ministry. Still, I am right because the proclamation also gives authority to the ministry. In my view, since the university is public property, that is the way to control and give priority to the public or government interest. It is a fact that the university's organizational structure is approved by the Ministry of Education and Civil Service Commission. I believe that it is their responsibility to amend the structure since it is considered one of the public sectors (JU2).

The legal provision of Higher Education Proclamation 1152/2019, Article 46, sub-articles 1–3, explains that the assignment of four out of the seven board members, including the chairperson is the responsibility of the ministry, while the university consults on the selection of the remaining three. This suggests that the government has been primarily responsible for nominating and appointing board chairs and members.

This aligns with the findings of Bladh's (2007) and Verhoest et al. (2004) studies, indicating that state control is evident when the government appoints the majority of board members as the number of members representing university staff diminishes. Furthermore, the updated university autonomy proclamation 1294/2023 does not specify the board chairperson assignment in the current autonomy policy reform, allowing the government to manipulate university governance to its advantage. Therefore, the university autonomy practice in this regard is low.

Moreover, although the legal provision bases the nomination and appointment of leadership positions on competition, the practice often deviates from the written law. One of the interview participants described the process of assigning university leaders in the following manner:

As to my reading from the higher education proclamation 1152/2019, article 52, sub-articles 1–5, dictate the assignment of the president and vice presidents. All the statements in the sub-articles explain that they are selected through a competition-based approach on the given requirements set by the ministry and accomplished by the committee assigned by the board. After all, the assignment of a president is approved by the ministry, and of the vice president is by the board, but the members and the person who leads the committee are assigned by the board, so all of these accomplishments couldn't deviate from the interests of the board, regardless the competency level of the candidates. The ministry and the board can approve the second or third candidate based on the authority given by the proclamation and the procedures. In my view, it goes to the government assignment. Here it seems that the political interest gets the upper hand, which is taken as normal by the university community (JU1).

Nearly all interviewees confirmed that the state nominated and assigned the Jimma University's president, primarily based on the candidate's political membership to the ruling party. The respondents indicated that the university does not properly implement the written competition criteria and processes for higher official assignments. In other words, they noted that it seems Jimma University's President is a political appointee, and every nomination is based on the decisions and recommendations of the ruling political party at the federal level. In the same way, informants indicated that Jimma University's vice president nominations and appointments follow the same process. In addition, the majority of the interviewees revealed without variation that the removal of presidents and vice presidents upon the expiry of their terms of office also goes to the government authority. They pointed out that the procedures written on the paper were not more important than for the sake of formality. However, all the informants clarified that the appointment of academic leaders, such as deans and department heads adhered to the legal provisions. Thus, the living autonomy seems to be less practical than the formal one except for the assignment of academic leaders (college deans and department heads).

Academic Autonomy

Academic autonomy, which independently determines the university's mission and involves the freedom to decide the core operations of the higher education institution including the autonomy to determine student admission standards, admittance numbers, programs, curriculums, research, and community service areas, the respondents' perceptions (see Table 2) are low with an overall mean of 2.09. Both groups of respondents (instructors and academic leaders) rated their perceptions almost identically (instructors' mean 2.09 and academic leaders' mean 2.07).

Furthermore, the table shows a slight deviation from the respective mean value among participants' perceptions of academic autonomy indicators (see standard deviation values, which are approximately 0.66). This suggests that participants' views of the exercise of academic autonomy are low, with little spread of responses from the mean score.

The qualitative data from the interviews also affirmed the quantitative findings. The participants agreed that academics are subordinate to the Ministry of Education, as they believed that the university simply follows orders from the higher authorities. For example, the 2023 Graduate Admission Test's standards were set by the Ministry, with no room for the university to flex according to its context-specific needs. This is despite the Higher Education Proclamation 1152/2019, which states that the Ministry shall determine the entrance requirements and standards for undergraduate students but not for graduate students. One university official elaborated on this issue, the person stated it as:

I think the ministry is knowingly getting involved in the operation of the universities, specifically with academic issues. To me, it is about the quality issue, which worries the government in general. The undergraduate student number is determined by the ministry because of resource implications, but the issue of graduate students for the 2023–2024 academic year entrance exam (Graduate Admission Test) for admission is a quality-ensuring strategy, in my view. Even the exit exam for the undergraduate is also to control the quality aspect, though it erodes the autonomy of the university (JU6).

Almost all of the interview participants raised concerns about the problematic nature of academic autonomy at the university. They attributed this partly to the university's internal inability to enforce the rules and regulations set by the Ministry and other relevant bodies. For instance, the Higher Education Proclamation 1152/2019 clearly states that the university has the freedom to handle the selection and admission of Masters of Science (MSc), Master of Arts (MA) degrees, and Degree of Philosophy (PhD) students through the setting of the entrance exams for the programs and development of different criteria for quality assurance, and. However, the university's internal environment poses challenges to the implementation of such formal autonomy. Furthermore, the informants stated that the opening and closing of new programs are under the Ministry's authority.

However, this outcome is inconsistent with Lerra's (2019) finding that showed that university academic communities in Ethiopia are autonomous in designing new curricula for both undergraduate and graduate programs based on local, regional, and national demands. The reason may be that the Ministry launched a harmonious curriculum, especially for the undergraduate program.

Financial Autonomy

In the context of a public university in Ethiopia, financial autonomy involves determining the tuition fees for private applicants, mobilizing additional income, internally disbursing the generated amount, assigning the required amount for the research fund, and conducting its procurement activities.

Table 2 illustrates participants' low (overall mean of 2.28) perceptions of Jimma University's freedom to exercise its legally granted autonomy concerning financial issues. Both groups of respondents rated their perceptions almost identically (instructors' mean 2.30 and academic leaders' mean 2.18).

The table also depicts a slight deviation from the respective mean value among respondents' perceptions of items in financial autonomy (see standard deviation values, which are about 0.76). This suggests that participants rated the poor exercise of autonomy with minimal deviation from the mean score.

The qualitative data also support the findings of the quantitative data. Almost all of the respondents to the interviews pointed out that without the role and procedures of the Ministry of Finance and the board, the university does not have the freedom to utilize its financial resources for the accomplishment of its mission. As an expert from the Ministry of Education explained:

To my knowledge, the university could generate money; it is required to prepare a plan and be able to distribute the budget with the knowledge and permission of the government, as it did for government-appropriated funds. The university could not use the money it generated if it went beyond what was planned, and it could not transfer a budget from one budget head to another on its own without the knowledge of the Ministry of Finance. Besides, the university cannot decide the amount of compensation for extra work and payable allowances; it needs a rate of payment determined by the government (JU9).

The majority of the interview informants also pointed out that the procurement processes were conducted by the government agency established for this purpose. The university's freedom in the procurement process is limited, as it can only decide how many items to buy from the suppliers identified by the government agency.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative data have shown that Jimma University's practice of exercising its financial autonomy seems minimal. This finding corroborates Bain's (2003) study that found that universities that earn most of their budget from the government lack confidence in exercising their autonomy and are very much concerned with responding to governmental expectations and priorities.

Staff Autonomy

One dimension of university autonomy is staff autonomy. This dimension concerns the freedom to determine academic staff profiles and criteria for recruitment, promotion, and firing. It also discusses the university's independence in determining academic staff workload and individual performance evaluation procedures. In this case, Table 2 shows that participants thought Jimma University had a medium level of freedom to use the legally granted autonomy to decide on the profile of academic staff, hiring, promotion, workload, procedures for individual performance rating, and firing. The overall mean score for this was 2.63. Both groups of respondents rated their perceptions almost identically (instructors mean 2.65 and academic leaders mean 2.57).

Furthermore, the table showed a relatively higher deviation from the respective mean value among respondents' perceptions of staff autonomy indicators (see standard deviation value, which is about 0.99). As a result, respondents view the exercise of staff autonomy as a medium, with a significant dispersion of responses from the mean score.

The qualitative data from different key informants also affirmed the quantitative data result. Most of the respondents to the interview questions indicated that the university has relative freedom concerning academic staff decisions. Almost all of the interviewees pointed out that in the case of academic staff recruitment, selection, and promotion, the university is working almost without the interference of an external body. One informant was quoted stating this issue as:

As for me, Ethiopia is currently undergoing higher education policy reforms, including the current autonomous university proclamation of 2023, which specifies the criteria for being an autonomous university. Yes, there is a certain level of staff autonomy, but the university also needs to consider self-sufficiency through its income-generation mechanisms and cost-reduction strategies. The current ratio of academic staff to administrative staff is about one to three. Strategic thinking is required for the internal capacity development of the line staff (JU8).

This study examines the practice of institutional autonomy from four perspectives: organizational, academic, financial, and staff autonomy. The overall practice status of institutional autonomy, as depicted in Table 2, is low (overall mean of 2.27). Both groups of respondents rated their perceptions almost identically (instructors mean 2.29 and academic leaders mean 2.19). Furthermore, the table also showed a slight deviation from the respective mean value among participants' perceptions of institutional autonomy (see standard deviation values, which are about 0.61). As a result, participants' views of institutional autonomy are low, with little dispersion of responses from the mean score. Of the other four dimensions of institutional autonomy, staff autonomy has a better status (mean 2.63) in practice than the other dimensions. Besides, organizational and academic autonomy is relatively lower (mean 2.08 and 2.09, respectively) than the rest of the dimensions.

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare instructors' and academic leaders' perceptions of institutional autonomy. The test results show that there is no significant statistically significant difference between instructors' and academic leaders' perceptions of the university's exercise of institutional autonomy ($t(230) = 1.036, p = 0.301$) in scores for instructors ($M = 2.29, SD = 0.63$) and academic leaders ($M = 2.19, SD = 0.52$). The magnitude of differences in the mean (mean difference = 0.098, 95% CI: -0.088 to 0.284) was not significant.

University Environment

Regarding the impact of the university environment, the majority of the interviewees concurred that both the internal and external settings hinder the implementation of legal provisions. For example, they agree on the weak internal capability to realize what is stipulated in the legal framework and lack of assertiveness or failure to resist the government's top-down decision. In line with this, almost all of the interview respondents pointed out that, the university community's awareness of the current legal policy provisions and the concept of university autonomy were also the other concerns from the university side. Besides, they pointed out that the lack of capacity-building programs for the university leadership is also another internal environment factor.

On the other hand, the external environment also influences the practice of formal autonomy. The majority of interview informants agreed that government interference through various mechanisms to manipulate the university's operation is the main aspect of the environment. One of the university interviewees made the following observation:

In my view, the budget is one of the controlling mechanisms. To me, exercising any aspect of autonomy is impossible without the independence of financial resources since it is the major input in realizing other dimensions of institutional autonomy. The other is a leadership assignment. I think this task bears a strong political undertone. That is the way to steer the university toward what the government requires (JU5).

The above view is shared by most of the interview respondents. This finding corroborates the Olsen (2009) study, which found that universities are considered to be national political instruments, and the government often seeks to steer them to realize their political presence. The other study result that confirms the above finding is the work of Ordorika (2003) and Verhoest et al. (2004), in which they found that one of the areas where the state has consistently intervened and limited university autonomy has been the assignment of university leadership. Moreover, almost all of the interviewees pointed out that the rules and procedures from different stakeholder groups, for instance, the Ministry of Education and Finance (approvals for new and termination of programs, procurement processes, budget transfer processes, repeated reporting, etc.), limit the exercise of the university's formal autonomy.

The above outcome is consistent with de Boer and Enders (2017), who stated that the use of different mechanisms in the form of intervention, such as reporting, approval, and setting a general framework that could guide and limit the extent of living autonomy. Jimma University's living autonomy seems vulnerable to systemic government influence, and it is divergent from formal autonomy. Due to the negative impact of the environment, the practice of institutional autonomy becomes less than the formal autonomy provided. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the provisions in the policy frameworks (proclamations, rules, procedures, manuals, etc.) do not guarantee living autonomy; rather, the relationship between the environment and the university context matters.

CONCLUSIONS

Except for staff autonomy, which is at a medium level, the other three dimensions (organizational, academic, and financial) of autonomy of Jimma University are significantly lower than formal autonomy. Both groups of respondents had a similar view of the practice of institutional autonomy in the university. This study concluded that the overall assessment of autonomy practice is lower than formal autonomy. Thus, living autonomy is divergent from formal one.

The study showed that the influence of internal and external environmental factors may cause a divergence between actual (living) autonomy and formal autonomy. Among the internal context, the capability of the university and the knowledge about university autonomy are the major environmental factors, while political influence, rules and procedures from different stakeholders, and shortage of financial resources from external environmental factors are the major environmental factors. As long as the government is the major financier of public universities, expectations are that it will continue to monitor the university's operations. Since university autonomy is impossible without sufficient financial resources, therefore, the legal framework provisions cannot guarantee the level of autonomy in public universities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

University autonomy is one of the key strategic elements that universities require to accomplish their mission. According to the findings of this study, Jimma University's institutional autonomy is lower than its formal autonomy. The deviation of the university's living autonomy from formal ones hinders its functionality in fulfilling its purpose. The study also identified that the university environment influences the practice of formal university autonomy as per the provision of the legal framework. In higher education institutions, it is difficult to meet the needs and expectations of the key stakeholders without a supportive environment to exercise their formal autonomy. Consequently, the concerned government agencies and the public universities themselves should take into consideration the relationship between the university and the environmental factors that determine the status of a university's living autonomy.

Given the inherent limitations of absolute freedom, public research universities require comparatively greater freedom to fulfill their missions effectively. Therefore, educational leaders and managers should take into account the role of the relationship between the university and its environment in promoting the realization of university autonomy.

Further research would better support this line of inquiry, as different categories of public universities strive to realize university institutional autonomy. We might explore various university autonomy realization mechanisms and shared experiences across different contexts to identify the most effective strategies. Moreover, larger cases with larger samples may yield more generalizable findings.

REFERENCES

- Bain, O. B. (2003). *University autonomy in the Russian Federation since Perestroika*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203499931>
- Ballou, K. A. (1998). A concept analysis of autonomy. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 14(2), 102-110. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S8755-7223\(98\)80038-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S8755-7223(98)80038-0)
- Berdahl, R. (1990). Academic freedom, autonomy and accountability in British universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 15(2), 169-180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079012331377491>
- Bladh, A. (2007). Institutional autonomy with increasing dependency on outside actors. *Higher Education Policy*, 20, 243-259. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300161>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Dabi, K. (2015). *Reforms in Ethiopian higher education systems in a global context: Continuities, changes, and challenges* (Doctoral dissertation). Addis Ababa University.
- de Boer, H., & Enders, J. (2017). Working in the shadow of hierarchy: Organizational autonomy and venues of external influence in European universities. In I. Bleiklie, J. Enders, & B. Lepori (Eds.), *Managing Universities: Policy and organizational change from a Western European comparative perspective* (pp. 57–84). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Enders, J., de Boer, H., & Weyer, E. (2013). Regulatory autonomy and performance: The reform of higher education re-visited. *Higher Education*, 65(1), 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9577-z>
- Estermann, T., Nokkala, T., & Steinel, M. (2011). *University autonomy in Europe II: The scorecard*. European University Association. <https://doi.org/ISBN:9789078997306>
- FDRE (2009). *Ethiopian Federal Government Procurement and Property Administration Proclamation, Proclamation No. 60/2009, 4859FDRE*.
- FDRE (2009). *Higher Education Proclamation, Proclamation No. 64/2009*, Federal Negarit Gazeta 4976.
- EDRE (2010). *Public Procurement and Property Disposal Service Establishment, Proclamation No. 184/2010, 5309*.
- FDRE (2019). *Higher Education Proclamation, Proclamation No. 1152/2019, 11445*.
- FDRE (2023). *University Autonomy Proclamation, Proclamation No. 1294/2023, 15117*.
- FDRE (2023). *Education and training policy*.
- FDRE (2003, July 3). *Higher education proclamation*. Federal Negarit Gazeta, 1–28.
- Federal Government of Ethiopia. (2009). *Financial administration proclamation (Proclamation No. 648/2009)*. Federal Negarit Gazeta, 4796.
- Field, A. (2009). *Discovering statistics using SPSS* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Gebremeskel, H. H., & Feleke, K. M. (2016). Exploring the context of the Ethiopian higher education system using Clark's triangle of coordination. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 22, 99-120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2016.1146564>
- Gebru, D. A. (2013). University autonomy: The Ethiopian experience. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 22(3), 271-288.
- Gebru, S. G., Hondeghem, A., & Broucker, B. (2020). Institutional autonomy of Ethiopian public universities: An application of the European University Autonomy Scorecard Methodology. *In Public Administration in Ethiopia: Case studies and lessons for sustainable development* (pp. 532-563). Addis Ababa University Press.

- Hailu, M. (2018). Models of higher education governance: Rethinking the Ethiopian experience. *The Ethiopian Journal of Higher Education*, 5(1), 31-56.
- Kassahun, K. (2015). *Governance in public and private universities: A comparative study* (Doctoral dissertation). Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.
- Lebeta, B. H. (2022). *Institutional autonomy and its mechanisms in Ethiopian higher education: Perspectives of formal and de facto autonomy in the case of Adama Science and Technology University* (Doctoral dissertation). Addis Ababa University.
- Lerra, M. D. (2019). *Perceived governance practices in selected Ethiopian public universities: Relationship with the government, autonomy, accountability, and empowerment* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) Addis Ababa University.
- Lerra, M. D., & Oumer, J. (2017). Leadership and management accountability of public universities in the south nation and nationalities people regional state. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 22(5), 22-40.
- Levacic, R. (2002). Evaluating the performance of quasi-markets in education. In T. Moe & T. Elmore (Eds.), *Advances in research on education*, 8, 53-83). JAI Press.
- Maassen, P., Gornitzka, Å., & Fumasoli, T. (2017). University reform and institutional autonomy: A framework for analyzing the living autonomy. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 239-250.
- Nokkala, T., & Bladh, A. (2014). Institutional autonomy and academic freedom in the Nordic context - Similarities and differences. *Higher Education Policy*, 27(4), 423-440.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2013.8>
- Olsen, J. P. (2009). Democratic government, institutional autonomy, and the dynamics of change. *West European Politics*, 32(3), 439-465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380902779048>
- Ordorika, I. (2003). The limits of university autonomy: Power and politics at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. *Higher Education*, 46, 361-388.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025382504110>
- Pizanti, I., & Lerner, M. (2003). Examining control and autonomy in the franchisor-franchisee relationship. *International Small Business Journal*, 21(2), 131-151.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242603021002001>
- Pruvot, E. B., & Estermann, T. (2017). *University autonomy in Europe III: The scorecard*. European University Association.
- Saint, W. (2009). *Guiding universities: The governance and management around the globe*. World Bank.
- Sarpong, J. (2021). *Research autonomy and "marketization" in higher education: A case study of two New Zealand universities* (Doctoral dissertation). Research Space@ Auckland.
- Shaw, G. (2018). The relations between the state and the university in Ethiopia: The case of Addis Ababa University since 1950. *Arts and Social Sciences Journal*, 9(2).
<https://doi.org/10.4172/2151-6200.1000327>
- Tamrat, W., & Teferra, D. (2018). Internationalization of Ethiopian higher education institutions: Manifestations of a nascent system. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 22(5), 434-453.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2010). Putting the "human" back in "human research methodology": The researcher in mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 4(4), 271-277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689810377562>
- Teshome, Y. (2007). *The Ethiopian higher education: Creating space for reform*. St. Mary's University College.

- Verhoest, K., Peters, B. G., Bouckaert, G., & Verschuere, B. (2004). The study of organizational autonomy: A conceptual review. *Public Administration and Development*, 24(2), 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.316>
- Woldegiyorgis, A. A. (2014). Adapting to global trends: Why and how is Ethiopian higher education changing? *The Online Journal of, New Horizons in Education*, 4(3), 23–29.
- Yohannes, H. (2010). *Governance in Ethiopian HEIs: State university relationship*. Tampere University Press.