

Academic Freedom and the Transformation of AAU from Epistemic Complex to Industrial Complex

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore how, with the advent of Addis Ababa University (AAU), a significant shift occurred in the country's higher education landscape. Such a conversion is perceived by most scholars as a change from 'doctrinal to empirical research'. The upshot of this alteration resulted in the permanent establishment of a link between research and the idea of the university. The study critically examines how Addis Ababa University (AAU) has changed from an epistemic complex, a space where intellectual autonomy, critical engagement, and scholarly freedom prevail, to an industrial complex where managerialism, performance metrics, and market form reign. Drawing from a systematic review of the literature, spanning from 1950 to 2025, the inquiry maps out important time frames in the higher education reforms of Ethiopia. This includes the 2023 autonomy proclamation, which accorded AAU academic, administrative, and financial autonomy. The paper untangles a complex dynamic whereby the autonomy declaration, despite institutional self-governance, simultaneously recreates neoliberal governance structures that privilege efficiency, accountability, and economic output over traditional academic ideals. The transformation has encroached on the primary domains of faculty governance, research autonomy, and student life, challenging AAU's historic role as a fountain of critical thought and democratic participation. We contend that with the introduction and implementation of the new strategic plan by the authorities, the university has been effectively transformed from a "cognitive complex" into an "industrial complex". The consequence of such a turn adversely affected knowledge production, the future of democratic participation on campus, as well as the university's contribution to the development of the common good of the country at large. The paper concludes with recommendations on how to reconcile administrative reforms and safeguard academic freedom, calling for policy frameworks that promote intellectual autonomy in Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa region.

Keywords: Academic freedom, epistemic complex, Industrial complex, Neoliberalism, University autonomy, Higher education reform, Knowledge production

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Introduction

Academic freedom has served as the backbone of higher education, enabling scholars and students to seek knowledge, voice ideas, and think critically without fear of institutional or political repression. At its root is the epistemic complex; it is a space in which knowledge generation is guided by intellectual freedom, scholarly excellence, and a natural quest for truth (Altbach, 2001). Historically, institutions such as Addis Ababa University (AAU) have functioned as grounds of epistemic complexes, especially during the post-independence period of Ethiopia, for facilitating independent thinking and nation-scale discourses on democracy, identity, and development (Asegedom, 2022).

However, during the past several decades, the traditional model of the idea of the university has been radically transformed. The increased dominance of neoliberal reforms, competitive funding regimes, and state intervention have reconfigured the university habitat globally and in Ethiopia, in particular, from spaces of critical research to instruments of national development agendas (Amare & Tadelle, 2024). This is well illustrated in the reorganization of AAU into an entity that can be described as an industrial complex, a measured output, economic value, and bureaucratic compliance institution.

The 2023 declaration of autonomy by the Ethiopian Council of Ministers granted AAU fiscal and administrative autonomy, the first "autonomous" university in the country (Addis Insight, 2023). While this was welcomed by many as an advance toward academic autonomy, others believed that such an autonomy was actually more administrative than epistemic in nature and may further solidify the university in the dominance of market reason and revenue requirements (Addis Standard, 2025). Consequently, with regard to the government's promotion of utilitarian metrics of performance, state interest, and marketplace demands, the autonomy has inevitably undermined important fields of study in the social sciences and humanities.

This review explains how Addis Ababa University's academic freedom has been transformed from an epistemic to an industrial complex and examines the socio-political pressures, organizational transformations, and policy decisions that have influenced this transformation and their implications for the autonomy, mission, and fate of higher education in Ethiopia, with the following specific review objectives.

Objectives of the Review

1. To examine the conceptualization of academic freedom in higher education globally and in Ethiopia, and to examine its relationship to epistemic authority and institutional autonomy.
2. To critically examine the past role of Addis Ababa University as an epistemic complex during the Imperial, Derg, and EPRDF regimes.
3. To analyze the policy and structural reforms that have led to Addis Ababa University's transition to an industrial complex model, paying particular attention to the effects of the 2023 autonomy proclamation.
4. To ascertain the effects of institutional reforms on academic freedom, research autonomy, faculty autonomy, and student engagement at Addis Ababa University.
5. To investigate the broader potential effects of the change in Addis Ababa University on knowledge production, critical thinking, and democratic debate in Ethiopia.

Methodology

This study utilizes a systematic review to critically examine how Addis Ababa University (AAU) has changed to managerialism and market rationality. Thus, the method we employed involves a range of sources

such as peer-reviewed journals, policy documents, institutional reports, and grey literature to capture the richness of history as well as the contemporary dynamics underpinning academic freedom within AAU. Adherence to PRISMA standards for a systematic review maintained transparency, rigor, and reliability in the process.

The literature review covered the period between 1950 and 2025, and this corresponded with three eras of the Ethiopian reform of higher education. The first era involved AAU's early years and initial role as a center of intellectual and political discussion. The second one, particularly in the early 2000s, led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), saw extensive reforms, including an increase in public universities and a shift towards central management. It was characterized by increased emphasis on performance-based funding and accountability systems in higher learning institutions. The third and most recent era is defined by the 2023 Autonomy Proclamation, which granted AAU formal administrative and financial independence. While hailed as a watershed, this shift has been interpreted as bringing the university further in line with industrial rationalities and raising questions of compromising academic freedom.

A systematic and stratified sampling process was used to gather authoritative and contextually relevant literature. Sources were acquired from databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, AJOL, and institutional repositories. Seventy-six pieces of literature that specifically addressed academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and neoliberal reform of African higher education, and more specifically Ethiopian higher education, were used. Non-English language and non-scholarly sources were not considered. Data were elicited via formal protocol, with both substantive content and bibliographic information categories. These included definitions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy framing, and discursive attestations of systemic change. Thematic coding was used to identify

recurring ideas such as commodification of knowledge, bureaucratization, and domination by audit cultures.

The thematic analysis revealed a pervasive but subtle movement of institutional priorities and discourses towards operational effectiveness and responsiveness to the market, away from intellectual independence. Specific focus was placed on how policy documents and institutional narratives seek to redefine autonomy in managerial terms, pushing the classical academic ethos of intellectual independence, inquiry, and criticism to the periphery. The evidence was presented through thematic matrices and visual timelines that document key policy and institutional developments from 1950 to 2025. These were read through a critical comparative lens that compared AAU's original epistemic model with its new industrial identity. Comparative regional analysis of other African universities put AAU's transformation in context. Lastly, the study concluded that the transformation at AAU is not merely administrative but also ideological, and it raised basic questions about the future of academic freedom, faculty governance, student engagement, and the mission of universities in democratic governance. The findings and discussion together suggested not only the "what" and "how" of AAU's reform but also the deeper "why" and "then what."

Historical and Theoretical Contexts of Academic Freedom

The ideal of academic freedom is grounded in deep philosophical and historical roots. Starting from the Socratic questioning in Athens to the AAUP Declaration of 1915, knowledge has repeatedly conflicted with power. The 1915 statement laid the foundation for a systematic model of academic freedom, including academic freedom of inquiry, teaching, and extramural expression, emphasizing the scholar's role in society as teacher and critical voice (AAUP, 1915).

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is a fundamental principle of higher education rooted in ancient battles for intellectual freedom. Evolving from medieval European universities like the Universities of Bologna and Paris, the initial articulation of academic freedom was linked with the need for scholars to be independent of church and state power. Over the centuries, particularly through the Enlightenment and the dawn of liberal democracies, academic freedom evolved into a normative principle that encourages the pursuit of truth, critical inquiry, and institutional integrity. In its modern usage, academic freedom entails several interrelated aspects such as the liberty to teach without interference, to seek and communicate research in an unimpeded fashion, to participate in academic decision-making, and to criticize prevailing thought and institutional norms.

Academic freedom is always relative. It goes hand in hand with duties, compliance with the norms of disciplines, fidelity to evidence, and accountability to the academic community and to society at large. Russell Kirk's reminder that academic freedom is not a license to pursue "private fancies" reminds us that the university is a public trust (Kirk, 1955). Therefore, academic behavior regulation has to be in the institution's hands rather than in the hands of outside political interests.

There is a basic distinction between individual academic freedom, scholars' freedom to pursue knowledge, and institutional academic freedom, which is about the liberty of a university to manage itself. Theoretically, these concepts go hand in hand, but practically, they might not. Trouble arises when institutional autonomy is employed to suppress contradicting voices, especially in politically tense environments (Bergan, 2006). Thus, academic freedom can be viewed not as a monolithic right but as a complex, multifaceted entity within institutional, political, and global cultural realities.

As Altbach (2023) and Johnson (2024) have highlighted, academic freedom is still contested in the present day, particularly in the context of political polarization, ideological surveillance, and funding dependency. Nevertheless, it is the bedrock of the democratic imperative of higher education. Most often, there has been tension between academic freedom and free speech.

Whereas freedom of speech and academic freedom are conflated with one another, they are still distinct. Freedom of speech is a broad privilege to speak on issues irrespective of context. Academic freedom is a professional right granted in academic conventions. It demands intellectual competence, peer accountability, and an obligation towards the pursuit of truth (Post, 2003). This distinction becomes especially important in determining the limits of academic freedom. Faculty members are protected in their teaching and research roles, but this does not entail authorization for unqualified or unsubstantiated statements under the guise of scholarship. Academic freedom thus needs to be exercised under professional and ethical boundaries (Altbach & De Wit, 2021) and institutional autonomy.

Allowing governments to determine academic propriety will inevitably cause politicization and sacrifice of academic autonomy (Altbach & De Wit, 2021). Academic autonomy demands knowledge, power, and the purpose of the university. Although universities are said to enjoy autonomy, this freedom is often limited to managerial control rather than true intellectual independence. In reality, governments and philanthropic organizations shape academic priorities under the guise of supporting autonomy. As a result, university autonomy becomes tethered to market-driven goals instead of fostering genuine scholarly inquiry.

Ethiopian higher education has swung between two ideals: the university as a humanist community that develops knowledge and civic virtue, and the university as an instrument for state-building. President Kassa Wolde Mariam's 1964 ideal envisioned the university as a center for reason and moral growth, consistent with Nussbaum's (2016) call for democratic

education. On the other hand, during the regimes of the Derg and the Revolutionary Democratic Front, the functionalist model treated universities as tools of economic and ideological programming. While such models have the potential to make things more efficient, they can lower the role of the university to mere labor production and strip it of the power to produce critical and creative thinking (Molla & Cuthbert, 2022).

Academic Freedom in Ethiopia

The development of academic freedom in Ethiopia has been shaped by sudden political change and disputed governance models. Following the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, the government of the EPRDF liberalized post-secondary education within a developmental state framework. Although policy papers such as the Higher Education Proclamation of 2009 (amended in 2019) theoretically acknowledged institutional autonomy, practice on a day-to-day basis has often been nominal and restricted (MoE, 2009; MoE, 2019). Ethiopia's Constitution guarantees freedom of expression but not actual protection of academic freedom. Hence, universities have remained tightly controlled by the state. The Ministry of Education still exercises considerable control over appointments, budgets, and curricula, de facto subjecting academic institutions to subordination to state interests (Ashcroft, 2010). Such top-down management undermines genuine autonomy and discourages intellectual diversity. Enforcing these pressures are Ethiopia's sociopolitical forces, including ethnic federalism, political surveillance, and ideological policing. Political science, history, and federal studies are the most vulnerable to censorship and self-censorship. University campuses have become political grounds where student protests and critical pedagogy are met with administrative or state repression (Zewde, 2004; Molla, 2014).

Epistemic authority, the power to define, verify, and disseminate knowledge, is central to academic freedom. Previously vested in religious or colonial sources of authority, epistemic authority in the

academy today is allegedly founded on peer review and scholarship. This authority is increasingly contested by states, funders, and international institutions. Governments in most settings establish epistemic authority by allocating funding for research and setting knowledge production priorities for national development policy initiatives. This can lead to the sidelining of critical social sciences for "strategic" areas like Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), entrepreneurship, or governance. In the Global South, donor agendas also set academic agendas, with indigenous epistemologies usually relegated to second place behind global academic standards (Tikly, 2004; Lillis, 2021). These forces generate anxieties regarding epistemic injustice, the habitual downgrading of domestic knowledge systems and even epistemicide, the elimination of native ways of knowing (De Sousa Santos, 2014). The emerging movement to decolonize the academy pushes back against these hegemonies by insisting that marginalized perspectives and non-Western epistemologies be brought into curricula and research and revalidated.

Institutional Autonomy

Institutional autonomy is typically defined as a structural condition for academic freedom. In theory, it would enable universities to control their academic, administrative, and budgetary affairs themselves. Practice indicates that institutional autonomy is always subverted by political centralization and financial dependence. In Ethiopia, autonomy remains mostly in dreams. Presidents of universities are state appointees and therefore more accountable to political masters than academic stakeholders. Budget dependence on the state equally prevents universities from pursuing independent research agendas or crafting locally responsive curricula (Molla, 2017).

Autonomy, as outlined by Salmi (2009), can be theoretically categorized into three distinct forms: administrative autonomy, which refers to an institution's independence in internal governance and staff recruitment;

financial autonomy, which involves the ability to manage and generate financial resources independently; and academic autonomy, which encompasses the freedom to design curricula and determine research priorities. All three forms in the Ethiopian setting are underdeveloped. The lack of institutional capacity to resist external pressures causes narrowed academic freedom and lessened epistemic legitimacy. There must be intersections among academic freedom, epistemic authority, and autonomy. The interplay of academic freedom, epistemic authority, and institutional autonomy reveals lying beneath the surface are tensions in the governance of knowledge lie beneath the surface. With research agendas dictated by governments or external sponsors, the epistemic authority of scholars to determine intellectual agendas is eroded, and academic freedom becomes nominal at best (Meek et al., 2009).

Moreover, freedom without responsibility may result in elitism or rigid institutions. Autonomy, thus, must be balanced by open and inclusive modes of governance involving students, scholars, and the broader world. For Marginson (2011), the legitimacy of higher education is a matter of freedom and responsibility. Universities are not exempt from broader political and ideological currents; they are sites where state agendas, market forces, and popular pressures meet. Navigating such contested terrain calls for ongoing investments in democratic values, scholarly integrity, and epistemic diversity, which face challenges.

In politically unstable or authoritarian settings like Ethiopia, intellectual freedom is violated systematically through surveillance, coercion, and ideological repression. Scholars and students who employ critical discourse can be censored, sanctioned, or even arrested. Such practice not only treads on academic rights but also jeopardizes public trust in universities as autonomous knowledge centers (Altbach, 2007). But reform is possible. Clauses that explicitly codify academic freedom, merit-based appointments to leadership posts, and institutional mechanisms for free debate can foster academic integrity. Democratic

modes of university governance can also allow academic communities to resist external interference. International networks such as the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), Erasmus+, and UNESCO Chairs offer a platform for solidarity, resources, and capacity building. Such international cooperation can insulate indigenous scholars from political repression and entrench global standards of academic freedom.

Historical Evolution of Addis Ababa University's Structural Framework

AAU was founded in 1950 by Emperor Haile Selassie as the University College of Addis Ababa and was initially patterned after Western academic institutions, particularly British and American ones. Originally controlled by a central body with a chancellor and senate to ensure top-down leadership, the institution was later renamed Haile Selassie I University in the late 1960s. Despite being subject to initial legal charters that granted nominal autonomy, subsequent governments, including the Derg regime, exercised strong political domination over its academic programmes.

Research and Academic Freedom

The intellectual history of Ethiopia must be apprehended in terms of the dialectic between Axumite cosmopolitanism and Lalibelan orthodoxy. Axum (1st–7th century CE), as open as it was to Hellenistic, Hebraic, and South Arabian influences, stood for what Matthew Arnold would describe as Hellenism, a culture of questioning, intellectual curiosity, and receptivity to rational thought (Arnold, 2006; Kaplan, 2021). Conversely, the Zagwe dynasty, centered in Lalibela, institutionalized Hebraism, moral strictness, spiritual obedience, and a system of education aimed at religious conformity. Monastic education prioritized scripture, memorization, and liturgical study, stifling critical inquiry (Desta, 2022; Assefa, 2023). This tradition, also known as "Lalibelism," left a legacy of

authority-based pedagogy that continues to influence educational culture in present-day Ethiopia (Gebremariam, 2022).

With the establishment of the modern university, we witness the triumph of Hellenism over Hebraism. Thus, unlike the old tradition (Lalibelim), the new University introduced four essential ideas that revolutionized the philosophical pedagogy of the country, as it did in other parts of the world as well.

The Re-organization (reformulates) the mission of the university by emphasizing research that necessarily goes beyond what is already known. Thus, in opposition to universities which opt for accumulated and stored-up knowledge, he advocates for science and research that address “*an as yet unsolved problem*”.

The very idea of academic freedom also arose with the advent of modern universities around the twelfth century. Indeed, the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn originated as part and parcel of the vision of modern universities. Hence, “*The state should adhere to a deep conviction that if the university achieve their purpose, it will realize the purpose of the state as well, and on a higher plane*” (Ostling, 2018, P. 41).

Thus, the essential duty of the state is to allow the universities to serve their highest ideal. In doing so, the state would undoubtedly benefit indirectly when the university fulfills its goals. Central to Humboldtian doctrine is also his demand for lecture halls to be free without any limitations. He fully endorsed the academic freedom expressed in the German tradition of Lernen and Lernfreiheit.

1. New Philosophical Pedagogy

The second important difference between the two traditions is based on the idea of a new philosophical pedagogy. With the emergence of the new universities, the old teaching method was replaced, and the

outmoded framework was broken, followed by a new phase. The new vision was aptly expressed by the German Idealist philosopher Fredric Schelling in the following words in 1803 in the German language and later translated into English in 1966:

“Ready-made knowledge can only be memorized. Knowledge is not truly our own until we are capable of reproducing the given content in a form of our making. Memorizing is but a negative condition. True or organic assimilation is impossible without inner transformation of what we learn. All rules for study are summed up in this one. Learn only in order to create. Only by his divine capacity for production is man truly man - without it, no more than a tolerably well-devised machine” (1966:p35 English translation).

This presents a devastating blow to the traditional pedagogical orthodoxy that gave precedence to memorization over creative appropriation. Shelling's declaration is symptomatic of the current assumption in contemporary philosophy of education.

Dialogue and Mutual Recognition

On another front, the teacher -student relations were also drastically changed. The call for dialogue and mutual recognition between the instructor and pupil became central to the modern educational process. Scholars over the last hundred years, from Martin Buber and John Dewey to Hans Georg Gadamer and up to Paulo Freire, have emphasized the dialogical nature of education.

Education is about dialogue; the very nature of dialogue demands mutual recognition between one or more people. We need the recognition and acknowledgement of the other for attaining a productive relationship: *“The voice of the other as well as his silence enables my*

voice to be heard" (Gadamer, 1960). In discussions on education, both thinkers emphasize the importance of dialogue, mutual recognition, and the role of the other in shaping understanding.

Teaching activity should enable, in Buber's language, me-and-thou relations to prevail and become possible. In other words, this is not a subject/ object relationship but a subject-to-subject relation.

Moreover, the dialogical approach demands I-thou relations, i.e., the relationship should be symmetrical rather than asymmetrical. The implication for education is quite clear. The relation between teachers and students is not one of domination. It should also not be one of an active and passive relationship. Instructors should not impose on students to follow their path. Students should be encouraged to raise their own questions and relate to their own experience.

In his insightful article on Buber, "(Pointing the Way)," Renato Huarse Cueliare tells us that for Buber to educate is to point the way. He quotes Buber, who says, "*I'm no philosopher, prophet, or theologian, but a man who has seen something and who goes to a window and points to what he has seen*" (Huarte, 2018, pp. 49- 58).

To be sure, teaching is not about imposition but an equal engagement in the adventure of ideas that is mutually carried out by teachers and students alike. Thus, according to the new perspective on teaching, the teacher does not impose his "path" on students but rather "*points the way to them*".

2. Truth and Instruction

The last and perhaps the most essential difference between the old and the new philosophy of education is based on the following point. In the old tradition, whatever the instructor tries to transmit to his students is supposed to be taken as truth. Its veracity is not to be questioned or

placed under any suspicion. Thus, the instructor should present his/her teachings with conviction and confidence regarding the truth of their presentation. This dogmatic attitude was replaced under heavy pressure by a different pedagogical approach. Consequently, teachers were advised to remain neutral about the subject matter they deal with. According to the new attitude, teachers were instructed not to teach or advocate their views as if it were the sole truth. They were also forbidden to teach and forcefully advocate their beliefs to gain acceptance by students. As President Eliot of Harvard put it:

Philosophical subjects should never be taught with authority. They are not established sciences; they are full of disputed matters, open questions, and bottomless speculations. It is not the function of the teacher to settle philosophical and political controversies for the people. The notion that education consists in the authoritative inculcations of what the teacher deems ... intolerable in a university" (Eliot, 1901:7).

Even though the experience of the Western and Ethiopian tradition shows a big difference between the old and the new school, in the case of Europe, we find continuity in terms of history and culture, and even see a similar spiritual attitude. As the foremost historian of universities, Charles Homer put it:

The contrast between these earliest universities and those of today is of course broad and striking ... and yet, great as these differences are, the fact remains that the university of the twentieth century is the lineal descendant of mediaeval Paris and Bologna (Haskins, 1957:17)

When we turn to Ethiopia, the establishment of the first modern university in the 20th century was radically different from the old traditional schools. Here, the operative term is discontinuity. The intellectual manifesto hung on the wall of the university reflects the new

philosophical spirit of education: “ኩሎ አመክሩ ወዘ ሠናየ አጽንዖ”;¹ this means try everything but hold on to the best (Trans. mine). We submit that the lack of dialogue and interaction with the old traditional education philosophy made the university’s culture open and subservient to Western educational norms.

Epistemic Foundations

Addis Ababa University (AAU) is the result of Ethiopia's quest to assert intellectual sovereignty while engaging with global educational paradigms. This epistemic foundation, nevertheless, did not last long. During the Derg regime (1974–1991), AAU underwent radical ideological reconfiguration. The university's curriculum was restructured along Marxist-Leninist frameworks, subjecting scholarship to revolutionary ideology and closer to Eastern Bloc intellectual traditions (Vaughan, 1991; Clapham, 2002). Education was politicized as a tool to serve an end, utilized to produce ideologically dedicated cadres rather than critically independent thinkers.

The EPRDF's rise to power in 1991 ushered in a new period, ideologically diverse, yet politically constrained. The university diversified its curriculum to include development studies, federalism, and international relations, reflecting both local pressure and donor-imposed globalization pressure (Teshome, 2013). Despite efforts at reasserting autonomy, AAU continued to operate within a political context that imposed boundaries on intellectual freedom, particularly on ethnically charged issues (Abbink & van Dijk, 2005). AAU's past is one of ongoing tension between knowledge production and the limits of the state. During the Imperial era, intellectual freedom was cautiously permitted, at least where it might be reconciled with the monarchy's modernizing ambitions. The university was a nursery for bureaucratic elites, and critical scholarship on issues of nationalism and development was possible, but only within the parameters of monarchical acceptance (Zewde, 2002).

This autonomy collapsed under the Derg, whereby knowledge became the immediate appendage of the party-state. Academic freedom was eliminated, and alternative knowledge was criminalized or marginalized. Intellectual resistance nevertheless persisted underground, indicative of the enduring power of critical inquiry despite repression (Clapham, 2002). The EPRDF introduced partial liberalization. While researchers enjoyed comparatively more freedom, especially in areas such as development studies and governance, there were red lines. Research on ethnicity, history, or federalism was likely to attract surveillance or censure. As AAU broadened its area of academic activity, its epistemic authority weakened, was constantly challenged, and was shaped by customary political forces (Teshome, 2013).

Each Ethiopian political regime has redefined the limits of academic freedom. Under the Imperial regime, AAU enjoyed some academic freedom insofar as it served imperial ideology and national unity. This situation allowed limited space for dissent and nurtured the first generation of intellectuals, many of whom later became critics of the monarchy (Pankhurst, 1990).

The Derg era was marked by repressive ideology. The universities became battlefields of ideologies, and students and professors were under surveillance, purge, and execution. Academic freedom was exchanged for political correctness, and the university became a propaganda organ rather than an institution of critical inquiry (Vaughan, 1991). The EPRDF era offered a re-opening of academic space but under strict political circumstances. Ethnic federalism, in creating new discursive openings, also established new mechanisms of control, particularly by politicizing faculty appointments and research grants. Academic freedom was granted irregularly, often depending on political stance and topic sensitivity (Abbink & van Dijk, 2005).

AAU's institutional relationship with the state has been ambivalent, oscillating between being a state-building partner and a source of opposition. During the Imperial era, the university was an elite-training

institution for the state, yet student activism periodically defied the regime's conservatism (Zewde, 2002). Universities were battlefields under the Derg. As the regime sought complete ideological control, students and professors often resisted, openly or clandestinely, creating a culture of intellectual dissent and underground knowledge production (Clapham, 2002). The EPRDF attempted to decentralize the state and establish ethnic representation but, in the process, also introduced factionalism and political clientelism into university administration. Though activism grew during this period, it was tightly regulated and regularly suppressed when it failed to align with state ideology (Teshome, 2013).

AAU has been leading the way in shaping, challenging, and redefining Ethiopia's national discourses. During the monarchy, intellectuals promoted a kind of "*Ethiopianism*" that underscored unity, monarchy, and modernization. This discourse submerged ethnic identity in the interests of national unity (Zewde, 2002). In contrast, the Derg rethought the national discourse in revolutionary Marxist terms, placing class above ethnicity and promoting proletarian internationalism. Ethnic identity was repressed as divisive (Vaughan, 1991). Through the imposition of ethnic federalism by the EPRDF, ethnicity became central to the political project. AAU was the site of intensive academic debates on whether federalism encouraged fragmentation or inclusion. Such debates encapsulate the university's dual role as both a legitimizer of state policy and an arena of intellectual contestation (Teshome, 2013).

AAU's academic structure has also remained evolving in keeping with the ideologies of ruling regimes. During the Imperial period, the academic curriculum was a mirror image of Western liberal education traditions with an emphasis on law, humanities, and sciences (Zewde, 2002). The Derg relegated traditional disciplines to secondary importance for the sake of politically expedient ones such as revolutionary history and political economy. The humanities were often manipulated for application in propaganda (Vaughan, 1991). The

EPRDF era saw a broader curriculum that included ethnic studies, development economics, and international relations, reflecting both internal political demands and global academic trends. However, these expansions often reflected donor interests as much as local priorities (Teshome, 2013).

AAU's foreign affiliations have shifted between regimes. It was originally closely aligned with Western institutions and followed Euro-American epistemic templates. The Derg's alignment with the Soviet bloc reoriented the university ideologically and materially (Clapham, 2002). During the EPRDF, AAU re-engaged with Western donors, which opened up new possibilities for collaboration and funding but also exposed it to global neoliberal frameworks of scholarly evaluation and governance. These connections sometimes marginalized local epistemologies in favor of technocratic and externally inspired research agendas (Teshome, 2013).

Proclamation 351/2003 formally directed university research to be linked with national development, setting the stage for industrial linkage and applied research. Up to 2014, the Ethiopian government had established the Industry–University Partnership Directorate/Center (IPDC), formalizing state efforts toward connecting the world of academia and the private sector. AAU and IPDC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in January 2022 focused on innovation development, technology transfer, and capacity building. These policy initiatives mark a concerted state effort to rechannel higher education along lines that better serve national economic interests. Legal-institutional arrangements since 2003 underpin AAU's transition toward becoming a knowledge-generating, innovation-focused university, along world-university–industry models.

Institutional Autonomy and the Industrial Complex Model

Regulation No. 537/2023, which was tabled in the Council of Ministers, gave Addis Ababa University full academic, financial, and administrative independence, making it Ethiopia's first independent public university in over five decades. The regulation allows AAU to have its own organs of administration, set its own admissions requirements, and have its own independent finances. The declaration is a landmark in Ethiopian tertiary education. It is a doctrinal and legal transition away from state tutelage and proclaims the university's right to self-governance and its capacity to reinvent itself into an industrial complex, globally competitive university.

Once it achieved autonomy, AAU established a dedicated Project Office and reorganized human resources and finances to manage its business. The university also adopted a block grant scheme of funding, granting internal control over the distribution of resources. Autonomy has made AAU a market-sensitive institution. It is no longer an extension of the state bureaucratic branch, but works with entrepreneurial discretion, a characteristic that is a *sine qua non* of the industrial-university complex. Autonomy by itself is no silver bullet; institutional capability and self-governance are critical to sustainability.

The 2022 MoU with IPDC created a structural link between the academic sector and industry, but actualization has been resisted, more precisely, in coordination, communication, and trust. As Alemu and Kassaye (2023) describe, the transition from formal arrangements to functional cooperation has been lopsided. Although formal instruments exist, the industrial complex model requires something more than contractual agreements; it requires operational effectiveness, confidence, and cultural change. Without them, the promised synergy between innovation, research, and industry will be stillborn.

Academic freedom is the essence of tertiary teaching, where there can be pursuit, creation, and sharing of knowledge without censorship or reprisal. Academic freedom provides intellectuals and students with the right to think and express themselves intellectually honestly while teaching, learning, and conducting their research. But with structural change in higher education institutions, particularly those initiated top-down, academic freedom is lost, redefined, or relegated to politics or economics (Altbach, 2001).

Ethiopia is a case where higher education-level reforms at the university have increasingly aligned with the objectives of the central state. This has also led to a considerable diminishment of institutional autonomy, particularly under the Ministry of Education (Teshome, 2003). Centralization of appointment, research agenda, and funding mechanisms has produced an environment in which research by academics is usually determined by political expediency. At Addis Ababa University (AAU), for instance, scholars have reported engaging in self-censorship and staying clear of politically sensitive research topics (Kassahun, 2017), implying that academic freedom is more and more defined by external political logic rather than scholarly norms.

If political agendas continue to dominate institutional change, however, the decline of academic freedom will likely become more solidified. But reforms that strengthen legal guarantees of scholarly expression preserve institutional autonomy and expand governance arrangements that could reverse this trend. Academic freedom, as Berdahl (1990) and UNESCO (1997) emphasized, thrives most firmly within a climate of institutional autonomy safeguarded by law and shared governance. Academic freedom includes research autonomy, such as independence to formulate research questions, choose methodologies, and share results without coercion. It is irrevocably connected with institutional autonomy, adequate funding, and overall intellectual atmosphere at the institution (Zezeza, 2012).

In Ethiopia, recent reforms have steered research towards policy- and development-oriented results. Performance-based funding mechanisms and an extremely high emphasis on national applicability, while beneficial in making research connect to public interests, also constrained the scope of academic inquiry (Saint, 2004; MoE, 2015). Researchers are increasingly being encouraged to do research with state agendas, and this weakens basic or critical research, particularly in social sciences and humanities.

AAU as a National and Regional Intellectual Beacon

Addis Ababa University (AAU), the Forefront University of Ethiopia, has been a preeminent institution to foster intellectual elites, conduct policy-forming research, and serve as a model for the Horn of Africa for a long time. Its proud history has allowed it not only to be a national gem but also a regional academic benchmark. Institutional reform, repeatedly shaped by efficiency, performance metrics, and national objectives, may enhance the basis of or destroy this leadership. Effectively managed, AAU's development can generate innovation and maintain the region's leadership. Academic quality, though, should not be made a pawn for bureaucratic control. The university's authority is to reconcile intellectual autonomy and regional cooperation with relevance at the national level, with specific specialization and local knowledge.

Restructuring has increased specialization, driving interdisciplinary research to the periphery and sidelining local knowledge systems. Focusing on STEM fields, as vital for economic development as they are, comes at the cost of context-differentiated research based on Ethiopia's rich epistemologies. This narrowing of academic attention promises to reproduce colonial knowledge hierarchies, where Western scientific thinking takes precedence and indigenous knowledge is marginalized. Proper academic reform requires promoting epistemic pluralism by integrating old and new systems, science and the humanities, to develop scholarship rooted in indigenous knowledge that speaks to the everyday

lives of Ethiopian societies, rather than yielding to global pressures. Conversely, African universities are increasingly shaped by donor-funded research, international rankings, and the commodification of knowledge. While the former global relations bring in money and exposure, they can dominate the local agenda. AAU is faced with a knife-edge balancing act; it must participate on the world stage without being epistemically in hock. That implies internal research strengths need to be enhanced and intellectual outsourcing needs to be resisted. Institutional autonomy must not be conflated with mere managerial autonomy, as it also requires the capacity to shape agendas that are responsive to Ethiopia's and the region's unique developmental and historical imperatives, thereby upholding academic freedom and fostering critical thinking.

The university's public role and institutional incentives for public scholarship and outreach are necessary, alongside efforts to make the boundaries between academia and society more permeable. Community-based research and popular engagement are vital to reestablishing the university's legitimacy and relevance. Although the AAU holds significant potential to influence policy, this capacity remains largely untapped due to political sensitivities, limited academic independence, and restricted operational space. To address this, the AAU must institutionalize its policy influence through active engagement in policy discourse, the establishment of research institutes, and the production of accessible public outputs. Universities should take on the role of active interlocutors in the public sphere, offering critical insight and strategic foresight to help guide national development.

State and foreign donor over-centralized research agendas can potentially stifle intellectual curiosity and long-term knowledge creation. In maintaining research independence at AAU, better funding and accountability must be complemented by institutional protection of freedom of inquiry through existing policies. Reform must strike a balance between relevance and academic freedom (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Faculty governance is an essential collegiate value, whereby

academic staff play a role in decisions around curriculum, research emphasis, staffing, and long-term planning. It embodies the democratic ethos of the university and is essential to maintaining academic standards (Birnbaum, 2004).

Structural adjustments in universities in Ethiopia have contributed to weakening collegial governance appreciably. Managerialism has displaced faculty from decision-making. At AAU, the faculty's participation in senates and key administrative positions has been limited, replaced by top-down decision-making by the Ministry of Education (Kassie, 2020). This shift weakens academic ownership, decreases transparency, and leads to institutional disengagement. Effective institutional reform must continue to involve substantial faculty participation. Decision-making that involves participation legitimizes academic decisions and enhances morale and institutional commitment. Rebuilding democratic institutions in universities is, therefore, fundamental for the attainment of academic integrity and institutional legitimacy (Marginson & Considine, 2000), including engagement during institutional changes.

The reforms since 2003, specifically under Proclamation 351/2003, represented a gradual departure from state dominance. The policy introduced greater autonomy in research and curriculum development, where academic goals were synchronized with national priorities of development, and institutional decentralization came into existence. AAU's transformation signals a transition from state-managed, centralized academia to a structurally liberalized system. Increased autonomy fostered the institutional culture necessary for its reorganization as an industrial-complex model. This aligns with Humboldtian ideals of academic freedom, but the Ethiopian process is more incremental and politically contingent.

Student engagement encompasses participation in academic and co-curricular learning, governance, and institutional discussion. It is central

to student development and civic participation (Kuh, 2009). Changes within AAU have tended to marginalize student voices. Institutional priorities have been conformity to national policy and efficiency, and these have worked to suppress genuine student representation on the majority of occasions. Dismantling student unions and restricting activism has reduced students' room for shaping their learning experience (Wondimu, 2012). Meaningful student participation requires more than symbolic representation; it requires meaningful voice in institutional decision-making and campus life. Reinventing spaces for student dialogue, supporting student-initiated events, and protecting student rights are most important to developing a participatory and inclusive academic environment (Trowler, 2010).

Critical thinking is the lifeblood of the university, but in politicized environments, campus space is often converted into sites of surveillance rather than those for reflection. Ethiopia's repressive political history has at times silenced scholarly critique, and so Addis Ababa University must reassert itself as a refuge for criticism and rational discourse. A genuine university must not be an instrument of ideology, but a place for controversial ideas. Maintaining this intellectual autonomy is not just an issue of academic freedom but crucial to creating a citizenry adequate to deliberate in a rational way and engage democratically.

Where political appointment dominates universities, heads and administrators are burdened with increasingly bureaucratic requirements, which brings in self-censorship and demotivated staff. It debases the very mission of the university as a critic of power and source of independent minds. Reform must provide a safeguard against political interference by developing open and participatory governance. Intellectual independence is not a luxury, but a requirement for innovation, public life, and national development that requires reform. Without it, universities are echo chambers of the ruling ideology.

Contemporary reforms increasingly emphasize technical proficiency and employability, often at the expense of critical pedagogy. In Ethiopia, the

shift toward market-oriented higher education has significantly diminished the role of the humanities and civic education. However, curriculum is inherently political. A university that fails to nurture ethical reasoning and critical citizenship forfeits its democratic responsibility. Meaningful reform must reintegrate philosophical depth and civic values into all areas of study, cultivating not only career-ready graduates but also thoughtful, engaged citizens. The university must be reimagined and strengthened as a democratic institution.

AAU has traditionally been part of Ethiopia's democratic struggle. Its lecture halls and classrooms previously gave rise to reformists, intellectuals, and critics, so it cannot step back into technocratic remoteness. It should rather stand as a democratic player, engaging in public discourse, advancing civic education, and generating scholarship that critically examines power. At a time of polarization, universities are obligated to foster dialogue and diversity. The rise of managerialism and corporate control in academia has led to a decline in public participation and the silencing of voices like the AAU at the national level, partly due to administrative invisibility and a low media profile that obscure its presence.

AAU's Strategic Plan

There is a profound transformation that is occurring in the university, as seen in its 2024–2028 Strategic Plan. AAU is moving away from being a traditional research-based university towards an orientation that focuses on industrial production, governance, and economic productivity. This is an international development whereby universities are being demanded to lead the creation of jobs, technological innovation, and fiscal responsibility. These are reasonable concerns in the age of rapid change, but they serve to undermine the fundamental academic mission of the university. The pursuit of employability and economic utility must not come at the cost of the critical faculty, autonomous intellectual inquiry, and contemplative character of higher learning.

The emphasis of the strategic plan reveals a deeper shift in the university's ideology. "*High-performance workplace*," "*diversification of resources*," and "*job creation*" are terms that move us toward business philosophy and away from humanistic values that have pervaded universities in the past. This is not rhetorical redefinition; it is a redefinition of what the university is and for what ends. The threat is that the university is converted into an outcomes-based factory, wherein measurable productivity takes precedence over intellectual freedom and moral contemplation. Placing performance measures above knowledge creation can lead AAU to compromise the very strengths that earned it a reputation as a model for higher education in the region.

The recent clamor for university autonomy follows this transformation from academic institution to business enterprise. When the university launched a plan under the banner of university autonomy, it had significantly changed its mission and ideals. Once the shift took place, the demand for autonomy and financial self-sufficiency inevitably followed. Thus, once the academic institution is converted into a corporation, it obviously operates with the logic of demand and supply.

Even though the trend that sees the university as an ally and instrument in attaining social and material goals began earlier, it has now reached a point of no return. The remaining part of this article will try to critically show the qualitative change the university has made currently from 'Epistemic complex' (Parsons, 1964) to 'Industrial Complex'.

In a recently circulated document titled "AAU's strategic plan: Reimagining our future," the Addis Ababa University authorities produced a strategic plan that presented themes and initiatives outlining the new mission of the University. Even though the plan contains nine strategic themes and initiatives, in the interest of saving space, we have only listed five of them below:

1. “Develop effective and accountable governance and organizational culture, structure, and system.
2. Provide an exceptional educational experience that prepares students for learning completion, employability, and job creation.
3. Attract, engage, and retain a talented community of faculty and administrative staff, focusing on creating a best-in-class workplace culture and environment in which excellence and opportunity thrive.
4. Be a leader in developing trans-disciplinary solutions to social, economic, political, technological, climate, and environmental challenges.
5. Strengthen knowledge-based community engagement for sustainable socio-economic transformation and improved livelihoods of the community.

A cursory examination of the above ‘strategic themes’ reveals a fundamental transformation of the university from an academic institution to a business or corporate industry. Let us consider the nomenclature employed in developing the new strategic vision and compare it with the previous university categories:

“Organizational culture, employability, job creation, a best-in-class workplace culture, technological climate, socio-economic transformation, resource generation, diversification, institutional resources, long-term sustainability”

When we turn to the conventional university terminology, we find the following terms: speculative, wonder, synthetic, analytic, conjuncture, refutation, hypothesis, arguments, probes, and counter probes, critical, inquiry, knowledge, truth, ideas, etc.

As we know, when language changes, thought definitely changes as well. This transformative agenda (scheme) is clearly declared in strategic

'theme eight', "AAU pursues innovations... to transform university functions, services and business processes" (AAU Senate Legislation, specifically Article 38.2.2)

The new strategic plan calls for the university to 'emulate' the practice of industries. They are pushed to "redesign, repackage, (reimagine) to shifting contemporary priorities"; this kind of move quite obviously subverts the university's main function to realize its intended mission.

The philosophical basis for the shift of the university to an industrial complex calls for an explanation. In my view, the rationale or the new doctrine rests on the following two interconnected assumptions: The primacy of the world of work (utility), and the identification of the common needs with the common good. Let us briefly look at them one by one. Here, we would like to acknowledge that we have heavily relied on Joseph Piper's book, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, which was published right after World War II and, of course, republished in 1998.

(A) The 'World of Work'.

The sole emphasis and attitude of the 'world of work' is to satisfy the material needs of society. It gives priority to the tangible and physical desires of human beings. Thus, the world of work promotes the world of "base physical existence, for food, warmth, clothing and roof over the head."

(B) Identification of Common Needs with Common Good

The 'world of work' is all about the 'common needs' in that it strives merely to satisfy the material needs of society. In addition, the common needs could only be satisfied within the world of work, i.e., the 'world of supply and demand'.

When we turn to the 'common good', it is a different matter. The two must not be identified or perceived to be 'synonymous': the notion of common good, we are told, is far more comprehensive than the concern of common good.

Unlike the 'common needs', the common good "requires that there should be men who devote themselves to the useless life of contemplation". Moreover, the common good has not only a single end but a multiplicity of ends to attain the pursuit of human good.

When we claim that the new strategic vision of the university is one-sided, we mean to say that it privileges the world of common needs over and above the world of common good. Hence, according to the new strategic plan, the university should not be appreciated "for what it is" (Newman) but rather for what it produces. As a result, the university should structure, reorganize, or re-create itself to help the state attain its economic and transformative scheme. Thus, the chief purpose of the university is to help in the government's stride to fulfill the satisfaction of the common needs of the people.

Disciplines under Attack

A university carries different educational 'sequences' in its broad and varied curriculum. The new strategic plan places immense pressure on 'natural science', 'social science' and the 'humanities' on a strict business rationale that they are not competing products in the market.

Natural Science

The presence of science makes the University what It Is. Science is presupposed in its very existence. We need to be careful not to take science as a preparation for application (Gadamer, 1986).

History of science clearly shows that most achievements in science were not made with the intention of achieving a utilitarian goal. Application is not the sole motive behind the activities of science. Some scientists in the 20th century, including Rutherford, were pleased when they realized that their work would not have any practical use (Butterfield, 1951).

Under the banner of creating university-industry linkage, all research is instructed to be relevant to practical usage. For instance, Strategic Theme 4 ascertains that their plan “ensures relevance of research conducted at AAU.”

Here, we would like to invoke Gadamer's (1986) idea of research since we believe it is representative of most scientists. According to him, there is no other type of research “except basic research.” When science is not reduced to sheer applied research, it provides immense benefits to students. Science helps students “strengthen their intellect, offers them the chance to develop scientific reasoning, and helps them to cultivate creativity. To achieve the above merits, the university should inculcate natural science as part of its essential programme.

Social Science and Humanities

Without having a firm ground in social science (sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, folklore, etc.). We cannot talk intelligently about society. Moreover, we need to have some concept of a good society before we evaluate the human condition positively or negatively. When we look more specifically into the study of humanities, as the distinguished historians of ideas put it, every university should embrace the acts of communication (language), the art of continuity (history), and the art of criticism (philosophy).

Let us say a few words about continuity (History). Ethiopia is currently suffering from distorted and disconnected narratives which are endlessly produced by uneducated would-be historians. History, however, when

handled by learned men/women, offers an important and useful purpose. It provides, for instance, “*a common matrix of values*” that enables citizens “to consolidate their membership into one communal fellowship.”

A recent book, titled *Interdependence and Interactions in Ethiopian History* (edited by Professor Baharu Zewde), precisely does that. It tries to bring back or revive what we have forgotten, i.e., to relive the tradition of cooperation and ‘interaction’ that we have collectively enjoyed in the past.

The sole problem with the new strategic plan is that it privileges utility and the satisfaction of material needs over other needs, such as intellectual, moral, and spiritual ones. Thus, the university is perceived as a place for training young people to produce goods and services, rather than acquiring knowledge in the “non-productive” sciences such as language, philosophy, literature, history, etc. This would, in the long run, adversely affect the government’s plan of producing properly trained engineers and technicians. As Robert Maynard Hutchinson had argued, vocationalism “*is in short bad for the student as well as for the universities and the professions*” (1936: pp. 36–37). Gadamer (1986) also claims that the great German educator Humboldt rejected the idea of making universities “*professional schools*”. This is so because he felt that the very term ‘education’ implies, by and large, avoiding the world of the profitable and the useful.

Ideals of University

Reflections about the nature and purpose of modern universities are vast. Despite the varied and differing approaches to the subject, however, there is a widespread agreement among scholars that the university is a place primarily dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and also a center where a community of teachers and students pursues higher learning based on human needs.

The university has multiple tasks to achieve by combining all theoretical and practical, cultural and professional, and scientific and humanistic studies in the realization of its mission. As a center of contemplation and programmatic study of fundamental questions, the university basically means “living with ideas.” Here we need to understand that there is always “a new tension between living with ideas vs. living with practical living.” Under the new strategic plan, the university is unjustifiably presented as embracing the latter rather than the former.

This means that, for instance, we need to forge a balance between the move to prepare students for the profession and for education. In this respect, we find the new strategic vision laid out by the authorities to be completely one-sided and devoid of balance and measure. We submit that this newly introduced line of thought subverts the idea of university as we know it.

Here, we would like to state that a reflection of the new policy is not tantamount to rejection of reformism as such. We are cognizant of the fact that the very use of a university calls for the adoption of new ideas that fit the demands of the time.

However, what we find to be problematic is that in its effort to overhaul the university’s mission, it inadvertently leads to ousting the good with the bad. Finally, to surrender ‘education’ to the rules of the market would adversely affect the university as well as the common good of the nation.

Globalization introduces another layer of complexity with epistemic tension. While donor funding, university rankings, and commodification lead to resources and status, they have a tendency to shift institutional priorities away from local and national goals towards global requirements. Counterbalancing this, AAU must mobilize internal resources and assert independence to carry out research on the basis of local realities. Institutional growth must emphasize epistemic

sovereignty and resist dependence on external agendas while leveraging global connections to serve its mission.

The university as a site of critical inquiry is particularly important in Ethiopia's politically charged landscape. Political forces have long constrained academic freedom and suppressed dissent, hindering the potential for the university to critically engage throughout history. Effective reform will avoid centralized administrative authoritarianism quashing debate and instead nurture critical pedagogy and participatory, democratic governance models enabling pluralistic thought and free speech.

Academic freedom is also undermined by politically appointed leadership and bureaucratic intervention, which weaken morale and invite faculty self-censorship. To safeguard its intellectual mission, AAU must decouple academic decision-making from political manipulation, pursuing open and collegiate governance models that empower academics and uphold academic integrity.

Curriculum reform at AAU is in danger of being based on technical and economic ends at the expense of critical consciousness and civic duty. Redefining education as a cultural and political process aimed at civic values, ethics, and critical inquiry must be determined. The purpose must be the creation of democratic citizens capable of participating intelligently in the affairs of society, not employees for the labor force.

As a civic actor, AAU has long been a key player in Ethiopian social movements and democratic culture. Its reforms must not be allowed to result in technocratic withdrawal but instead reassert the university's public purpose of setting values, policy, and civic engagement. Managerial reforms and declining public visibility over the past few years have muffled AAU's voice in public discussions, calling for greater efforts in brokering academic-public conversation through community research, public lectures, and open scholarship.

To fulfill its social responsibility, AAU must actively influence policy by means of critical research, inquiry, and participation in public affairs. Political sensitivities and eroding academic freedom have hindered this role, but internalization of policy discourse, establishment of think tanks, and encouragement of evidence-based policymaking can regain the university's policy role.

AAU's ambit extends further than Ethiopia, having educated leaders and trainers from Eritrea, Somalia, and South Sudan, and providing a regional model. Leadership has responsibility; a politicized or corporatized AAU could negatively affect the whole region. Alternatively, a reformed, autonomous AAU can provide an important point of reference for higher education in the Horn of Africa.

Regional cooperation in consortia and collaborative research on development, conflict, and migration are necessary for learning exchange. AAU's ongoing participation in such initiatives should be supplemented by reforms that enhance its ability to spur cross-border partnerships. In conflict zones, institutions like AAU are well situated to develop peacebuilding via intercultural dialogue, education, and critical inquiry. Including peace studies, regional studies, and cooperative programming in AAU's core agenda would reassert its traditional role as an intellectual and social bridge builder in the Horn of Africa.

From an Epistemic Complex to an Industrial Complex

AAU's 2024–2028 Strategic Plan demonstrates a deep paradigmatic shift in the university's identity and purpose. The university has embraced neoliberal values and now describes itself as an "industrial complex" with employability, income generation, and performance indicators as intense preoccupations. This shift is part of a global trend in universities, as universities are increasingly becoming commercially oriented institutions rather than places of reflection and critical inquiry. The vocabulary of the strategic plans' vision, like "job creation," "high

performance," and "innovation," amounts to a retreat from traditional academic values of inquiry, reflection, and critical problem-solving.

This shift raises elemental philosophical concerns about the mission and purpose of education. Pieper (1998) cautioned against delimiting education within the utilitarian demands of the "workaday world," counseling that instrumentalism risks neglecting those moral, cultural, and intellectual dimensions constitutive of an integral education. Nussbaum (2010) has expressed the same worry, describing the demise of the humanities as a "silent crisis," alluding to the dangers of marginalizing disciplines that foster critical thinking and moral consciousness. The notion that addressing socio-economic needs as such is doing the common good is an illusion, argues Pieper. The common good must also make space for contemplation, ethics, and humanistic building, aspects conspicuously absent in AAU's economically motivated strategic plan.

The effects of this re-ordering of priorities are felt especially in the sciences and the humanities. The natural sciences have traditionally thrived on curiosity-driven research rather than immediate applicability, and the practical market-driven approach risks undermining the foundation of pure science. The social sciences and the humanities, however, are critical to social knowledge production, civic engagement, and cultural memory. The marginalization of these disciplines undermines the university's democratic function and its capacity to interact with society on other-than-economic terms. This narrowing focus endangers the academic core of the university and sabotages its mission of developing smart, ethical, and complete human individuals.

Benefits of the Autonomy Journey from Three Eras of Higher Education Reform

There are several advantages of the autonomy journey of Addis Ababa University. First, autonomy allows for greater independence of the

institution in general and its management in particular. Second, autonomy contributes to better efficiency of the university's activities. Third, autonomy promotes innovation in teaching and learning. Finally, autonomy helps to enhance the global competitiveness of Addis Ababa University. As far as the benefits of autonomy are concerned, the literature identifies a number of "BIG LESSONS" worth mentioning. In particular, there are three major eras of higher education reforms in Ethiopia. The first era (1950-1974) indicates that no matter how strong a university might be intellectually, if it is used for state-building purposes, its academic freedom might be jeopardized. The second era (2000s-2022) shows that despite the fast growth of higher education in Ethiopia, autonomy cannot be guaranteed due to centralized leadership and the political sensitivity of issues related to academic independence, which makes professors censor themselves. The third era – 2023 Autonomy Proclamation – illustrates that despite having legal and financial autonomy, universities might become involved in neoliberal managerialism and knowledge commodification.

Challenges

The evolution of higher education, especially regarding Addis Ababa University, occurred in three distinct phases, each having its own particular problems and big lessons. In the first phase (Imperial Period - Academic Autonomy Era), there was considerable academic freedom and intellectual independence in the university, but there were some problems such as limited access, elitism, lack of national orientation, and inadequate expansion to meet societal demands. The big lesson from this era is that, although academic freedom is very crucial for creating knowledge, academic freedom must be in line with the needs of the country and issues of accessibility.

In the second phase (Derg Regime - Centralized Control Era), the government had a firm grip on universities, resulting in poor university autonomy. Some of the problems associated with this era include politics of the university, lack of academic freedom, politicization of curricula,

and deterioration of the research environment. This era was characterized by universities being used as tools for propagating the ideologies of the government. The big lesson from this era is that over-centralization hinders innovation and the quality performance of universities.

The third era (post 1991 Reform and Massification era) focused on growth, decentralization, and autonomy of institutions. Though this era enhanced access and widened the curriculum, it faced problems such as poor academic quality, lack of proper funding, difficulties in governance, research capacities, and accountability issues. The major takeaway from this era was the necessity of autonomy along with effective governance, accountability systems, adequate funding, and quality measures to sustain the performance of institutions.

In general, it can be concluded that for effective reforms in the field of higher education, there needs to be a balance between academic freedom, governance, accountability, and national development priorities.

Big Lessons Learned from the Review of Literature

There are also big lessons learned from the review of the existing literature. The review makes a contribution in the sense that it presents important lessons regarding changes in autonomy in higher education through various periods of reforms. It shows the trends in the development of autonomy at various stages, and the strengths and weaknesses, as well as possible lessons, from each stage. It further emphasizes the interplay between autonomy and governance and issues such as accountability and quality assurance in higher education institutions. Besides, the review compiles fragmented lessons learned from previous studies to make an integrated knowledge base for future research and policy improvement in this domain.

Conclusions

Addis Ababa University, as much as the entire higher-education system of Ethiopia, is at a crossroads. Shaped by a complex history of imperial ambition, political meddling, and foreign influence, the university today holds both promise and constraint. Under Haile Selassie, its creation was a categorical move toward international practice and secular schooling, but since that time, its course has stayed entwined in shifting governments and competing ideologies. The challenge of our era is how to reconcile this inheritance with the need for reform, not cosmetic or administrative but intellectual, cultural, and democratic in nature. Academic freedom is at the heart of that transformation. It is not a privilege of academics but a public interest essential to democratic societies and the academic community itself. Its defense requires something more than policy pronouncements. It takes enforceable legal protections, institutional autonomy, self-governance, and a cultural commitment to open inquiry. Without these, universities will be bureaucratic training facilities, efficient perhaps, but without the critical and civic purpose that defines authentic higher learning.

Reform must also address the epistemic foundations of the university. Ethiopia must critically confront its own intellectual heritage, drawing upon the cosmopolitan rationalism of Axum but resisting the hierarchical and obedience-oriented traditions that have conditioned its academic culture. Knowledge production must be pluralistic and grounded locally, rather than mere importation or ideologically screened. The selection of leaders must be open and on merit; the financing must be stable and free from political influence; and monitoring must give way to trust in academic autonomy. At the same time, the university must decline to succumb to market dictates of rationality. Although innovation and economic importance are crucial, these cannot be achieved at the cost of the university's broader functions: to encourage ethical citizenship, to sustain democratic discourse, and to be a place of independent, critical thought. Addis Ababa University cannot be transformed into a technical school for state or market needs. It must instead recapture its role as a

cultural institution, a place of intellectual seriousness, and an agent of national development on humanistic and civic grounds. The task ahead of us is not merely to reorganize but to reimagine the university, its purpose, its values, and its relationship to society. Only by undergoing such a change can Addis Ababa University realize its greatest potential: to be not only a hub of specialization, but a living reflection of Ethiopia's intellectual and democratic ambitions.

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