

**Perceptions, Challenges, and Opportunities for University Autonomy: The Experience of Addis Ababa University's Governance Reform Initiative**

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**Abstract**

*One of the most critical issues in the 21st-century higher education academic discourse including the discourse in the Ethiopian context is the extent to which African universities enjoy the status of autonomous universities. An autonomous university is set in the best of conditions to exercise independence, total control, and management of itself in its overall functioning, including academic, financial, and institutional freedom of inquiry. However, this statement of autonomy has been threatened by many African countries to an unprecedented degree, as stressed in the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility. Looking at higher education in Ethiopia, it has been influenced by government-favored political ideology (Ashenafi Aboye & Metcalfea, 2021) for at least three regimes (1916-2018). This study has attempted to bring to the forefront the recent Ethiopian experience of reforming its higher education governance into an autonomous status. The objectives of this study were to explore the very drives for higher education autonomy in the Ethiopian context and analyze the enabling factors and associated challenges towards it. Taking Addis Ababa University, the oldest and biggest national university in the country, and employing a descriptive research methodology where quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a survey questionnaire and document review, the study revealed significant challenges and limited progress in introducing autonomous governance in Addis Ababa University at both conceptual and practical levels. The dire need for members of the university community and stakeholders to get all on board for a shared vision, the unwavering commitment of the government to support universities, and the need to develop the infrastructural capacities of universities emerged as critical requirements for successful autonomy. Furthermore, the study asserted that the process, nature, and procedures of granting universities an autonomous status vary from context to context and from time to time, being so complex that the exercise attracts many actors such as the government, public universities, external donors, non-governmental organizations and different professional societies to play.*

**Keywords:** *Autonomy, governance, university reform, context, commitment*

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## **Introduction**

Higher education in developing countries faces serious challenges such as inadequate access, funding, and teacher salaries. Limitations in institutional autonomy, teacher qualifications, pedagogical materials, facility conditions, and quality assurance mechanisms are also on the list (Oliver, 2004). Many universities in developing countries are denied self-administration, face censorship of their academic practices, and encounter serious interference from governments or ruling parties. Academic freedom is not a constitutional right as is the case in most Western countries. Increased government involvement under various pretexts has continued to be the norm jeopardizing universities' right to make decisions over local or internal matters. The Ethiopian case is no better than this in the overall context of the developing world.

Despite its long-lived independence from colonialism, the country has been largely unstable and economically weak for most of its history due to internal ethnic and political conflict and external aggression (Prunier & Ficquet, 2015; Bayeh, 2022). Consequently, general education and higher education in the country did not reach the desired level of expansion until 1991, when the military regime of Ethiopia was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF). Before 1991, the Military government negatively influenced higher education by forcing universities to offer courses that reflected the regime's political ideology which was Marxist Leninist ideology. The EPRDF regime in its turn introduced a liberal policy in terms of expanding higher education, but it also attempted to reorient higher education as an instrument of revolutionary democracy which largely proclaimed homogeneity instead of diversity in the higher education sector. For almost the entire 20th century, the country had only two universities (Tekeste, 2006). Modern Western education in the country is only slightly over a century old. Only in the last two decades

have robust and multiple educational reforms taken place in the country. The reforms in the higher education sector were unprecedented in terms of equity and access, with enrolment increasing as fast as 200% (Anteneh, 2016). The post-1991 government designed policies that helped higher education expand faster than ever. But it also introduced several other contradicting policies that negatively impacted the higher education sector and universities. One of these was the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) in the design of which universities had very limited participation and in a way, it was a top-down policy that did not reflect what universities wanted. This policy impacted negatively on universities as it promoted curriculum harmonization instead of differentiation among universities. Another policy was the 70/30 % natural sciences and social sciences policy where 70% of university entrants joined natural science studies whereas only 30% joined social science studies. This policy was not transparently discussed by universities in the country; it was imposed top-down. One of these recent reform initiatives is the government's commitment to grant autonomy to public universities (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2023). This initiative has long been awaited by the Ethiopian elite because public universities have been under severe government control of governance for nearly half a century. Key university leaders and managers were, for instance, assigned centrally to universities with minimal participation of university staff. Course curricula were developed centrally by the Ministry of Education, compelling universities to comply with what was designed centrally. Additionally, universities were forced to implement item-line budgets allocated by the government regardless of their specific budgeting needs. Several sources, for instance, (World Bank, 2021; Abdulkadir et al., 2018; Capital Ethiopia 2024) indicate that in addition to the Federal Government, there was evidence that regional governments in Ethiopia had both direct and indirect control of public

universities in the country for the past 30 years. Regional governments assumed a dominant role through regional universities' administrative boards directly by imposing the views, and university faculties were coerced indirectly to be loyal to the region's senior officials.

Universities have had little or no control over almost all aspects of university affairs, such as administrative, financial, academic, and organizational aspects. Public universities became inefficient as they were not allowed to manage their own budget. The morale of the staff working in public universities was eroded due to undesirable interference from the government in affairs such as academic freedom and low pay. Finally, the quality of education suffered as universities could not admit students on their own by administering their entrance examinations and due to the meager resources allocated to them by the government. They have been instructed to implement centrally or nationally developed curricula, modules, policies, and programs, without having the opportunity to express their views meaningfully in a bottom-up manner and make their own professional and academic decisions (Teshome, 2007). Lack of academic autonomy extends to decisions made by external bodies such as the Ministry of Education on academic calendars, curricula, and course contents, course schedules, and the introduction of new programs. In some cases, the Ministry interferes with the process of curriculum development.

University top officials have been directly appointed by government bodies, and large-scale procurements have been made by a national agency for universities. Directives and instructions on how to manage university affairs quite often descended from top officials down to universities. Academic freedom barely existed (Ashenafi & Metcalfe, 2021; Dowden, 1993) as faculty were harassed or even detained and tortured if they violated top-down instructions or made any comment on the regime's political

system and policies. Research agendas were quite often handed down by the government irrespective of consulting universities for meaningful contributions and endorsement by the university faculty and by researchers. Given such a history of academic suppression, the initiative of government to turn universities into autonomous ones has been warmly welcomed.

University autonomy presents both challenges and opportunities for institutions worldwide. While autonomy allows universities to innovate and improve quality (Aithal & Aithal, 2019), transitioning from centralized control to autonomy poses difficulties, especially in post-Soviet countries like Kazakhstan (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015). Challenges include management issues, financing, meeting educational demands, developing relevant curricula, and maintaining accountability (Kasozi, 2002). Additionally, fostering learner autonomy in classrooms faces obstacles such as a lack of teacher readiness and passive student attitudes (Dwee & Anthony, 2017). The process of university autonomy reforms has created tensions between traditional academic domains and emerging executive structures within flagship universities (Fumasoliet al., 2014). However, opportunities arise from economic development, social need for higher education, and positive government attitudes towards education (Kasozi, 2002). To address these challenges, universities can leverage their autonomy for academic, research, and technological innovations, as well as collaborations and expansions (Aithal & Aithal, 2019). Ultimately, the successful implementation of autonomy requires addressing socially and ideologically constructed complexities within transitioning universities (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015).

Studies on university autonomy in Ethiopia are scarce and limited. However, even the very few research works critically highlight that public universities have significant challenges due to strong control by both the federal and the regional governments and

their lack of freedom to decide over their own academic matters. Despite patchy policies and legal bills that mention the right of universities in Ethiopia to autonomous governance, public universities have always had undesirable monitoring and manoeuvring of their internal issues by the government, and consequently, their level of institutional autonomy has been quite low when evaluated through the European University Autonomy Scorecard (EUAS) methodology (Solomon et al., 2020).

Mid-2023, however, came as a complete surprise for all stakeholders in the higher education sector of Ethiopia. This was the year when the Ethiopian government took an unprecedented initiative to introduce university governance reform, a move from government-controlled universities to autonomous ones backed by legal frameworks; namely, the Regulation for Establishing Addis Ababa University (2022/23) and Granting of Autonomy University Proclamation (FDRE, 2023) endorsed by the Ethiopian parliament.

The university autonomy reform is a new initiative and the first of its kind in terms of the level of commitment made by the government and the degree of autonomy expected for universities to enjoy as stipulated in the proclamation (FDRE, 2023). Subsequent basic and action research is needed to shape it as it goes all along the way so that an effective autonomy system can be put in place in the Ethiopian public universities. Addis Ababa University, the oldest and biggest university in the nation, was purposely selected by the government to be the first university where autonomy reform would be implemented at the start, before an all-out grant of autonomy to all public universities. A government regulation bill providing for the re-establishment of Addis Ababa University as an autonomous university was endorsed by the Council of Ministers of the FDRE (Regulation for Establishing Addis Ababa University (2022/23)). The university was then set on implementing autonomy reform.

This study explored the genealogy and overall status of this newly introduced autonomy at Addis Ababa University, which could be taken as a symbol of the commitment of the Ethiopian government to gradually granting autonomy to all public universities in Ethiopia with the intention that the experience might be valuable to other public and private universities in the country. The move could also be seen as a boost for similar continental initiatives as many African countries tend to have more similar socio-economic and political contexts than the differences. Through the literature review and the concluding remarks, implicit comparisons of reform practices in different contexts have been made in this study. The study explored the challenges and opportunities that confronted the preparatory stage of the autonomy governance exercise from the perspective of university community stakeholders and policy experts. It further explored the range of the provisions made in the national autonomy bills endorsed, the preparations that have been made toward the implementation of autonomy on the ground, and the challenges, opportunities, and limitations that may be associated with it. Specifically, focusing on Addis Ababa University, the study sought answers to the following questions.

1. What challenges necessitated the desire for public universities to change their model of governance into an autonomous one?
2. What enabling and constraining factors were observed in the autonomy-granting policy documents and during the process of preparing for the implementation of autonomy in Addis Ababa University? Were there universal characteristics shared by the Ethiopian autonomization process and those in other parts of the world?

### **Theoretical Framework**

A great body of literature attests to the fact that autonomy removes many barriers and challenges that higher education institutions (HEIs) face and paves a smooth way of achieving better student outcomes. University autonomy is a multi-dimensional concept (Orosz, 2018). The European University Association (EUA) argues that institutional autonomy is vital for smooth and effective university operations and a framework for describing efficient university autonomy is extremely important as it stipulates that

Institutional autonomy is widely considered an important prerequisite for modern universities to develop institutional profiles and deliver efficiently on their missions. Discussions around university governance and autonomy have emerged across Europe in different contexts as a response to new diverse challenges. As a result, it has become imperative to develop a conceptual framework of reference to address such an important topic and meet the increasing demand for comparability and benchmarking across borders. (EUA, 2023)

Due to its comprehensive nature in addressing many aspects of autonomy and its status as the most up-to-date framework, this framework has been chosen to guide the analysis of university autonomy in the context of Addis Ababa University. It is thus essential to examine the framework in detail as follows.

EUA outlines four dimensions of university autonomy: organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy, and academic autonomy (EUA, 2023). Organizational autonomy centers on the rights for self-decision regarding the



election and dismissal of management, selection of criteria for administration, duration of work of the management, possibility of attracting outside specialists to the governing bodies, opportunity to make decisions regarding the academic structure, and opportunity to create official institutions. Financial autonomy articulates the importance of self-power in deciding the duration and type of financing, opportunity to make a profit, opportunity to receive credit, opportunity to own real estate, ability to determine the level of payment for students, and opportunity to regulate payment for students.

Academic issues such as determining the level of recruitment of students and their total number, as well as their selection at different levels of training, determining the filling of programs at different levels of instruction, deleting or closing the curricula, choosing a language of instruction, developing criteria for quality assessment, and determining the main content of the program fall under the domain of academic autonomy. It is in personnel autonomy that institutions have the power to create opportunities to make personnel decisions, determine the level of wages, and make decisions for the development of a career in administrative and academic personnel.

Each component of the EAU's model resonates with what is happening in Ethiopian public universities. Universities, for instance, do not have the right to determine their top management or leaders (organizational autonomy). They do not have the right to decide on their financial matters. They are not allowed to undertake their own procurements, reallocate budgets as they wish, and secure funds from donors (financial autonomy). Budgets are allocated to them by the government externally and their expenditure is highly controlled by bureaucratic tools. Universities cannot employ staff members without the consent of top officials in most cases (personnel autonomy).

They cannot have the full freedom to decide over their academic matters such as developing their curricula for courses they teach (academic autonomy).

Given the opportunity to exercise autonomy, institutional leaders can have the freedom to freely govern their institutions by themselves as per their vision, missions, and goals. Fallis (2004, p. 33) further elaborates on the significance of university autonomy as follows:

Institutional autonomy is required for the mission of the university. Autonomy is required for free inquiry—the *raison d'être* of the modern university. It is integral to all the responsibilities of the university. Free inquiry is the essence of the tradition of liberal education. The theory of knowledge inherent in the research mission of the university assumes free inquiry: knowledge is best advanced when it is subjected to tests based in free inquiry. Free inquiry encourages a diversity of opinions and allows the university to fulfill its responsibility for preparing future citizens. Free inquiry values knowledge for its own sake, escaping the distortions which can arise when there is a concern with how the knowledge will be applied, or who paid for the inquiry, or what the government wants to hear.

The argument here is that universities should be shielded from bureaucratic control and political interference. University faculty who are busy with their daily routines should be given the freedom to execute their tasks given that these activities can only be performed by professional academics who have mastered a complex body of knowledge through extensive formal training and apprenticeship. Just to borrow Brubacher's words, "The republic of scholars" (Brubacher, 1967) must be respected, and must be sovereign. Clark (2014) asserts that

The complexity of the work and the high degree of specialization university faculty are engaged in means that their work can be neither directly supervised nor effectively regulated by conventional hierarchical controls; instead, control comes from professional norms and peer controls. Autonomy should then be considered a natural right of universities. Attempts to apply conventional hierarchical administrative techniques can be dysfunctional in that they tend to drive out competent professionals and cause those who remain on campus to become discouraged or to take collective action to vent their frustration.

In the 21st century knowledge economy, universities are not only there for their traditional roles of research and teaching (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995) but also for more important functions that arise with the demands of the 21st century, such as helping nations despite international competition and knowledge and technology transfer and thereby achieving excellence as a goal. The writers mentioned above further argue that universities need to function with full freedom to make decisions. Universities need to be governed by policies that nurture generous provision of capital and unrestricted exercise of autonomy (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995) so that they can achieve excellence. Existing research literature has already established a strong link between university autonomy and achieving excellence. Quite recently it was remarked that around the world, nationally, regionally, and internationally, institutional autonomy, much has been said about its instrumentality in maximizing the efficiency of universities, is under siege and is an increasingly pressing issue that needs concerted research both nationally and internationally.

## **Method**

Closely examining the lived experiences of Addis Ababa University, the oldest and the biggest Ethiopian university founded in 1950, , as an illustrative case, this study attempts to relate the course of actions taken at this university toward the new initiative of moving from a non-autonomous university to an autonomous one. This study is founded on the view that direct observation of phenomena is a proper way to measure reality and generate truth about the world (Acharyya, 2019). The qualitative-quantitative design was chosen for this study as it implies that the research questions raised in the study can be fully answered from both objective and subjective data. The need for objective and subjective data in turn implies the use of instruments that yield both qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, a structured questionnaire and a document analysis were used to serve this purpose. The choice of these instruments provides the researcher and the informants with flexibility in the data collection process.

To this end, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected using two data-collecting tools: a semi-structured questionnaire and a document analysis. The semi-structured questionnaire survey intended in this study was chosen to be a descriptive-exploratory survey where only an available set of informants were randomly contacted for data collection irrespective of the demographic variations of the population and irrespective of the size of the number of informants to get possible insights. Moreover, the responses secured from the questionnaire were to complement the data to be secured from the document review. The semi-structured questionnaire was thus administered online to all available and willing academic staff members of the University to complete, and 101 informants were able to complete and return it in time out of a total of nearly 2000 active teaching academic staff. The semi-structured questionnaire aimed to secure largely objective data regarding informants' reaction to the autonomy

initiative proposed by the University while the document analysis sets out to collect largely subjective data from different documents regarding the proposed initiative.

Seeking to consolidate answers to all research questions, it was also essential to undertake a systematic document review and analysis. A document review is a process that entails the collection and interpretation of relevant documents for research (Rice, 2019).

The three documents chosen for the review were: the public university autonomy granting bill issued by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (Proclamation: 1294/2023), the regulation for the re-establishment of Addis Ababa University as an autonomous university (The Council of Ministers, Regulation No: 531/ 2015 E.C), and a series of minutes of the Addis Ababa University central autonomy taskforce regular meetings.

The criteria or framework of indicators adopted by this study to guide the entire investigation of the notion of autonomy in the context of this research is that of the European University Association, a framework of indicators comprising four types of autonomy: organizational, academic, staffing, and financial. The framework developed by the Association was also used by the University of Shanghai to rank universities for their autonomy, excellence, funding, and accountability. The quality of the qualitative data collected was generally assessed in terms of validity and relevance criteria (Mays & Pope 2000). Reliability checks such as reflexivity, attention to negative cases, fair dealing with issues discussed from all angles, clear exposition of the methods of data collection, and analysis, respondent validation, and triangulation, and expert opinions were used for assessing the validity and reliability of items used in both data collection instruments. The quantitative and qualitative data collected from the questionnaire were systematically organized on an Excel spreadsheet file, analyzed, and reported using the

established protocols and norms. The reporting of the respective data such as descriptive and inferential statistics for the quantitative data and systematic thematic review for the qualitative data was then made. Means and percentages were used to highlight key trends in the analyzed data. Incomplete questionnaire items were excluded; the collected data were cleaned, and the qualitative data were systematically organized thematically to ensure that the collected data would have a high level of quality. Quantitative data were systematically organized using descriptive statistics and narrative interpretation of those data followed by inter-data set comparisons and reflections made.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results obtained from the analysis of the instruments used have been presented thematically and signposted by the research questions set. The key themes signaled in the research questions and discussed as follows were the challenges of non-autonomous public universities, enabling and constraining factors towards introducing autonomous governance, and scope of the autonomous provision and the limitations associated with it, among others.

### **Long-lived Challenges of Non-autonomous Public Universities**

Both document review and self-reported open-ended questionnaire data revealed many challenges faced by Ethiopian public universities, especially the Addis Ababa University, during the last three regimes: the military regime, the EPRDF regime, and the current Prosperity Party-led Federal Government of Ethiopia. Political manoeuvring of top university leaders' appointments, lack of academic freedom, lack of ownership of the university by the university community, and lack of control over

the university's budget were some of the challenges reported by the informants. Specific examples include the final appointment of university presidents by the Ministry of Education with minimal participation of university faculty (deprivation of institutional autonomy), the imposition of courses or curricula from the same without the consent of universities to implement (deprivation of academic autonomy), the procurement of resources by external government procurement office, without carefully consulting the concerned universities of their actual needs and scarcities (deprivation of financial autonomy), and limited participation of the university's broader faculty in decision-making process (lack of ownership).

Informants recalled that 42 seasoned professors from Addis Ababa University were, for instance, fired from their jobs immediately after the EPRDF took power in 1991 (Dowden, 1993) without any precondition or notice, which is a stark example of the strong political interference of the ruling government with the university's administration and internal affairs. This is a clear overriding of universities' academic freedom, which creates havoc and insecurity for the staff to undertake their duties and responsibilities professionally. The imposition of a centrally or nationally developed curriculum for implementation in universities despite the latter's resistance to doing so was cited by informants as an indication of a lack of academic freedom in Ethiopian universities in general and in Addis Ababa University in particular.

Two examples can be taken to show the lack of shared vision among the staff and the lack of control over the university's budget. One is the existence of divided opinions as regards the university's future and governance caused by political cadres infiltrated into the university by different political parties with desperately low motivation created among the staff to work. The second issue is the unjust allocation of the budget for the various university units. In other words, there were impositions on

the university as regards its freedom to decide over its organization and financial management.

Informants reported that the cumulative impacts of those long-lived challenges on the university manifested in various forms such as the poor level of competence of graduates of the university compared to what is expected of them in the international labor market, impoverished overall academic infrastructure and services, ever-deterioration of academic quality and poor faculty salary (an average of 400 USD in 2023 per month for a full professor, for instance), perhaps the lowest in Africa given the currently available data on faculty pay rates. Just for an illustration, an academic staff member working in Uganda, a near Ethiopian neighbor, typically earns around 26,280,300 UGX per year (which is nearly 600 USD per month) (World Salaries (<https://worldsalaries.com/average-academic-staff-salary-in-uganda/>)).

An informant remarked “All teaching staff [members] are running for other needs, to satisfy basic life needs, because their monthly salary at AAU is very low. This is a fundamental problem to alleviate academic problems in the university.” (Extracted from interview transcripts).

In sum, Ethiopian public universities, with Addis Ababa University at the front, have historically lacked institutional autonomy in terms of academic, financial, organizational, and personnel freedoms to enjoy.

### **Enabling and Constraint Factors in the Move to Autonomy**

The commitment of the Ethiopian government to introduce university autonomy and implement it in public universities has been extremely minimal despite the promotion and advocacy of the importance of the idea of university autonomy by the elite in several research papers and media academic discourses. In 2023, the



government came forward with a strong push for reforming the governance model of universities toward autonomy backed by a proclamation (Proclamation Numbered: 1294/2023) that provided public universities with institutional autonomy. The proclamation set as its objectives or rationales, among other things, enabling HEIs to be free to make decisions on their affairs so that they become efficient in producing trained human capital for national development and become internationally competitive, and the need to re-establish HEIs where their faculty, researchers support staff and students undertake their professional duties with freedom and where rich research and teaching-learning knowledge and practice are available, innovation is nurtured, robust health and other services are provided. It would, therefore, be critical to closely examine the overall context of the autonomy reform process both nationally and at the institutional level, focusing on Addis Ababa University, in terms of factors that serve as fertile conditions on the ground for its implementation and factors that, on the other hand, would impede its speedy preparation and implementation.

Highlighting the challenges side, informants underlined factors such as lack of meaningful consultation with stakeholders, including the leadership of the university at various levels, the faculty, the support staff, the students, and the wider public, and shortage of time for the development and approval of the proclamation as serious limitations with the preparatory stage of the implementation of the autonomy reform. Consistent with this argument, data from the questionnaire analysis revealed that the awareness and knowledge of the support staff, for instance, toward the envisaged autonomy and the potential outcomes it would bring to them was minimal, as depicted in the table below, with 38.6% of the respondents being undecided to respond.

**Table 1**  
*Awareness and Knowledge of Support Staff*

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	4	4.0
<b>Agree</b>	11	10.9
<b>Undecided</b>	39	38.6
<b>Disagree</b>	30	29.7
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	17	16.8

Worse was the awareness and knowledge the university students had regarding the reform initiative, as reported by 40.6% of the sample faculty members' disagreement (Table 2). It follows from this that if students' awareness of the reform process and reform objectives is poor, the overall initiative would face obstacles and resistance. The reform initiative had to bring everyone or all potential stakeholders on board for the best effect. Many respondents were also at the point of "undecided" regarding the situation, the implication of which can still be a lack of sufficient promotion and mobilization activities for the student community, the key university stakeholders, regarding the autonomy initiative. The implication here might also be a deliberate and diminished level of engagement on the part of those respondents for various reasons such as dissatisfaction with remunerations, political resentment, and lack of interest in doing so.

**Table 2**

*Awareness and Knowledge of the Student Community*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	12	11.9
Undecided	32	31.7
Disagree	41	40.6
Strongly Disagree	16	15.8

Findings regarding the public's awareness and knowledge of the potential outcomes that autonomy would bring to them are also perfectly aligned with the above claims, with 38.6% of respondents disagreed, as shown in the following table.

**Table 3**

*Awareness and Knowledge of the Wider Public*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	11	10.9
Undecided	32	31.7
Disagree	39	38.6
Strongly Disagree	19	18.8

The most outstanding finding here was the overall poor preparation status the university was making such as poor staff and students' awareness of the reform benefits and challenges, insufficient infrastructural readiness, and lack of shared strategic planning toward implementing the autonomy reform, as indicated by 32.7% of informants who responded as "undecided" regarding the matter, which could imply more to the negative than the positive one, although 30.7% of informants did respond "agree" to the same issue. The fact that 32.7% of the respondents chose 'undecided' implies that in one way or another, the university was not able to bring all stakeholders

such as students and staff on board for the successful realization of the reform initiative. It should be clear that an explicitly demonstrated commitment on the part of key stakeholders was required to make the reform successful.

**Table 4**

*University's Level of Preparation toward the Autonomy Implementation.*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	5	5.0
<b>Agree</b>	31	30.7
<b>Undecided</b>	33	32.7
<b>Disagree</b>	26	25.7
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	6	5.9

In addition to the limitations as far as preparatory works are concerned, informants have also outlined several other negative factors that are likely to impede the progress of the implementation of autonomy, such as illicit political influence that is probably exerted on the process by the government. The illicit influence manifests itself in indirect interferences the government makes into the university's affairs by, for instance, assigning top leadership, restricting academic freedom by way of coercing professional societies such as teachers' association in the university, and by infiltrating the government's cadres into the various academic positions of the university. They further affirmed that those constraints could probably lead to mistrust and lack of confidence in the government by faculty concerning autonomy. Respondent further reiterates in a statement that due to those constraints; the university faculty were to develop concerns regarding autonomy. He states that

The process was influenced by political considerations, rather than the best interests of the universities, and was rather top-down. This led to concerns that autonomy would be used to benefit certain groups or individuals, rather than to

improve the quality of education. (Taken from the summary text of the qualitative data).

One could further conclude from the detailed narrative responses forwarded by the respondents that the expected autonomy had a weak legal framework, one that neither provides safeguards against abuse of autonomy by politicians nor stipulates legal measures that would make universities in charge of their breaches. Lack of requisite experience for managing self-decision making, poor resources, and poor level of readiness were also spelled out by the informants as additional constraints for the autonomy to go as fast as desired. Informants also identified internal and external challenges the university was likely facing such as political interference. Respondents remarked that if the government continues to interfere with university affairs, which would largely stifle academic freedom, institutional autonomy will be at stake. They expressed their concern that the precarious situation of the country, such as civil war, the dwindling economy, ethnic violence, global inflation, regional war, and global climate change would jeopardize the implementation of autonomy. The lack of public resources is another potential external challenge mentioned. If public universities are not given the resources they need by the government, they may not be able to implement autonomy reform effectively. This could lead to problems such as staff shortages, poor infrastructure, and a lack of teaching materials.

External regulatory bodies and accreditation agencies may also impose strict guidelines and compliance requirements on universities, informants further explained. Adhering to these regulations can add administrative burden and limit the level of autonomy that AAU can exercise. Societal and cultural factors can influence the acceptance and implementation of autonomy initiatives. Resistance to change,

traditional hierarchies, and cultural norms may impede the adoption of new practices or challenge the autonomy reform initiative. Changes in demographics and market demands could also pose challenges to the implementation of autonomy, the informants reported. AAU should stay responsive to the evolving needs of students, employers, and society to ensure the relevance and sustainability of its program. The increasing development of the private sector could challenge the university by draining its seasoned faculty, they explained.

However, there were positive sides that were outlined by the informants as enabling factors. Respondents expressed their hope that there would be a bright future for autonomy to materialize, as it has been long awaited by the faculty. An informant summarized what this means when he remarked that “Expectations from the public are very high.” The issuance of legal instruments to protect autonomy by the government, the start of several preparatory works by the university, such as the development of several new policy documents and guidelines for the university in compliance with the new demands of the autonomy proclamation, and the university re-establishment regulation were cited as encouraging moves although they were remarked as not sufficient. Statistical evidence from the questionnaire analysis also disclosed that there was a good level of understanding and awareness of the autonomy initiatives by the top management. The implication of this awareness is better readiness to effectively mobilize the university community towards a speedy and effective implementation of the reform initiative. The highest number of informants, 36.6%, was in favor of reasonable awareness and knowledge of the top management about the autonomy reform initiative at Addis Ababa University, as the Table below illustrates. Moreover, attempts made to engage the university management at various levels in the autonomy preparatory discussions and the broad participation of faculty and senior professors in

developing various autonomy instruments could be taken as very important enablers. The strong desire for reform on the part of the broad university community because of the already decaying academic and work culture in the university was also underlined as a key enabler.

**Table 5**

*University's Top Management Awareness and Knowledge of Autonomy*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	25	24.8
Agree	37	36.6
Undecided	28	27.7
Disagree	7	6.9
Strongly Disagree	4	4.0

#### **Scope of the Autonomy Provision: Limitations**

The idea of university autonomy dates back to 1954 in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa University, 2022) when Haile Selassie I University, today's Addis Ababa University, was a chartered university whose chancellor and protector was the King of the Country, Emperor Haile Selassie the First. The university was, however, deprived of its charter when the Military Regime took overpower in 1974, and many expatriate staff were expelled from the university and sent back to their countries. For over three decades in the country, university autonomy has been simply given to the public as a lip service to achieve political goals. It was in 2003 when the first proclamation of higher education (Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003) was issued that the idea of university autonomy emerged. In later versions of the proclamation, such as Proclamation No. 650/2009 Higher Education Proclamation, and Proclamation No. 1152/2019 Higher Education Proclamation, the idea was still there although practically all public universities were under the strong abusive hands of the government.

Proclamation 1152/2019, for instance, states the following under Article 16.

1/ Every public institution is hereby granted the necessary autonomy in pursuit of its mission. 2/ Subject to the responsibilities of the Board and the Ministry as stipulated in this Proclamation, autonomy of public institutions shall also include to: a) develop and implement relevant curricula and research programs; create new or close existing programs; set up its organizational structure and enact and implement its internal rules and procedures; b) consistent with other provisions of this Proclamation, select, through a transparent system of competition, academic and other staff to be employed by the institution and designate or determine their responsibilities based on institutional requirements and expectations concerning performance and quality of work; c) administer its personnel based on the provisions of this Proclamation and the principles of other applicable laws; d) nominate the president, vice presidents and select and appoint leaders of academic units and departments as provided for by this Proclamation; e) manage its funds and property on the basis of this Proclamation and other applicable laws and regulations. f) Generate and utilize other incomes to support its mission through this proclamation and other relevant laws and regulations. 3/Every public institution shall exercise its autonomy in ways that, at the same time, ensure lawfulness, efficiency and effectiveness, and transparency.

However, the idea of university autonomy as a critical and the most viable option for reforming the higher education sector in Ethiopia to a better status came along with the issuance of the autonomy proclamation, University Autonomy Granting Proclamation No.1294/2023(Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,2023), in May



2023. The proclamation was also followed by the issuance of the Addis Ababa University Re-establishment Regulation on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2023, No: 531/2023).

These legal bills are the mark of the first ever strong move and attempt where high-level commitment has been made by the Ethiopian government to genuinely reform the higher education sector. Intensive preparations have been made toward those bills as of mid-2021, and consultations have been conducted at various levels. One of the milestones taken in the preparation was the establishment by the Ministry of Education of a reform task force in AAU comprising 80 staff members selected from all colleges and institutes of the university. The task force, which was organized into seven teams, was accountable to the AAU board but worked in collaboration with and supported by the AAU management from the top to department levels. Its mission was to conduct a needs assessment, identify gaps, and make short and long-term recommendations (Addis Ababa University, 2022).

It was essential in this study to review the proclamation document in terms of its coverage and limitations to fully appreciate the scope of the intended reform, as discussed in the sections ahead. The University autonomy-granting proclamation has seven parts, 48 major Articles, and several sub-articles and was endorsed by the Council of Ministers of the FDRE on February 27, 2023. Some of the key rationales outlined in the preamble of the proclamation for its importance and realization were enabling HEIs to be free to make decisions on their affairs by themselves so that they become efficient in producing trained human capital for national development and become internationally competitive, the need to re-establish HEIs where their faculty, researchers support staff, and students undertake their professional duties with freedom and where rich research and teaching-learning knowledge and practice are available, innovation is nurtured, and robust health and other services are provided, enabling HEIs

to diversify their revenue generation methods and thereby gradually improve their income so that they can effectively engage in national development initiatives, and the need to make HEIs autonomous financially, economically, and organizationally so that they can achieve their missions effectively (FDRE, 2023). Even though the proclamation states the meaning of university autonomy as follows, “A non-profit legally established public HEI with budgetary support by the government set up to ensure an equal opportunity for all citizens with financial, economic, organizational, and administrative freedom” and articulates the aim of the proclamation as “to establish autonomous universities that promote social, political, economic and cultural development, create a system whereby autonomous universities attain self-sufficiency in terms of income by revenue generation, efficient and cost-effective administrative system.” (The researcher’s translation from Amharic to English), some articles in the same proclamation appear to contradict these premises, such as Article 8, the roles and responsibilities of autonomous universities, No. 2, which states “The universities develop program based on the national need of the country and the priorities of the development sectors” and, No. 9, which states “Employing, administering and firing staff, based on the Board’s regulation which is to be issued in observance of and based on national and international labor rights and standards.” From Articles “8 & 9” above, one can infer that universities cannot be fully autonomous as they are required to base their programs on national priorities and cannot dismiss academic staff or employ academic staff without the consent of their boards.

While it is essential for universities to address national priorities in their academic programs, they should also be allowed to develop programs of studies the universities expect to be of regional and international significance or for that of humanity at large. Another limitation of the proclamation appears to be the lengthy

hierarchical governance structure, which has eight layers of governance: Chancellor, Executive Board, President and Vice Presidents, Senate, Autonomous University Council, Managing Council, and an executive committee from top to bottom, along with two additional offices, the quality assurance office and the audit office, to be established and be accountable directly to the Board, making the governance units number ten. This complex structure impedes speedy decision-making as several units of the structure have to take part in a particular operation. Moreover, each unit will be deprived of unit-level autonomy to make its own decisions, and that in turn deprives staff of their ownership of their institution.

The proclamation appears to give almost all key governance responsibilities to the Executive Board, which is set to have 9 to 11 members, to be chosen by the Ministry of Education in consultation with the Federal Government based on merit, gender, representation of stakeholders, and other issues. The president of the University is a non-voting member and a secretary on the Board. From this one can see that all members of this critical unit, the Board, are to be chosen by the Ministry of Education, delegated by the Government. The University plays no role in nominating members to the Board. This appears to seriously jeopardize the degree of autonomy that the university is set to enjoy. Elsewhere in the proclamation, though it is stated that the university community will have the opportunity to choose the university president, the Proclamation, Article 13.6 states that the “Board will finally choose three candidates and submit them for final appointment to the Chancellor”. The ultimate decision to choose the university’s president is therefore not of the university community but of the government, through the Board and then the Chancellor, who is directly appointed by the Prime Minister of the country.

Regarding academic programs, research, and community service, Part Four of the proclamation, two sub-articles, Articles 28.1 & 28.2, are contradictory. The former states that the university can offer regular programs, continuing education programs, and distance programs using Information Communication Technology (ICT), while the latter states that the details of the types of programs offered and the criteria for offering those programs by the above modalities will be decided by the Ministry of Education. This appears to jeopardize the academic freedom of universities. Similarly, in Part Three, where we find stipulations about academic and organizational freedom, we find two sub-articles contradicting each other, sub-articles 26.1 and 26.3. The former states that an autonomous university has the freedom to run its academic program and its administration, while the latter states that the university in question will still be monitored and controlled in doing so, although it does not say who will monitor and control it. Here, it should be noted that the notion of centralization of the control of universities tends to be strongly opposed to the notion of autonomy.

Another limitation of the proclamation is the existence of overlapping duties and structures in it. Articles 18.6 and 24.2 state that the Senate will issue regulations on the appointment of academic positions below the Vice Presidents, and the procedures of selection and the appointment of officers, directors, and so forth will be issued and approved by the Board, respectively. Moreover, two important structural units introduced in the reform, the university council and the managing council, do not appear to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the proclamation.

Another limitation of the proclamation is its stipulation regarding the medium or language of instruction in the university. Excluding language courses, the medium of instruction is stated to be English, unlike many autonomous universities, which have the freedom to choose the language of instruction.

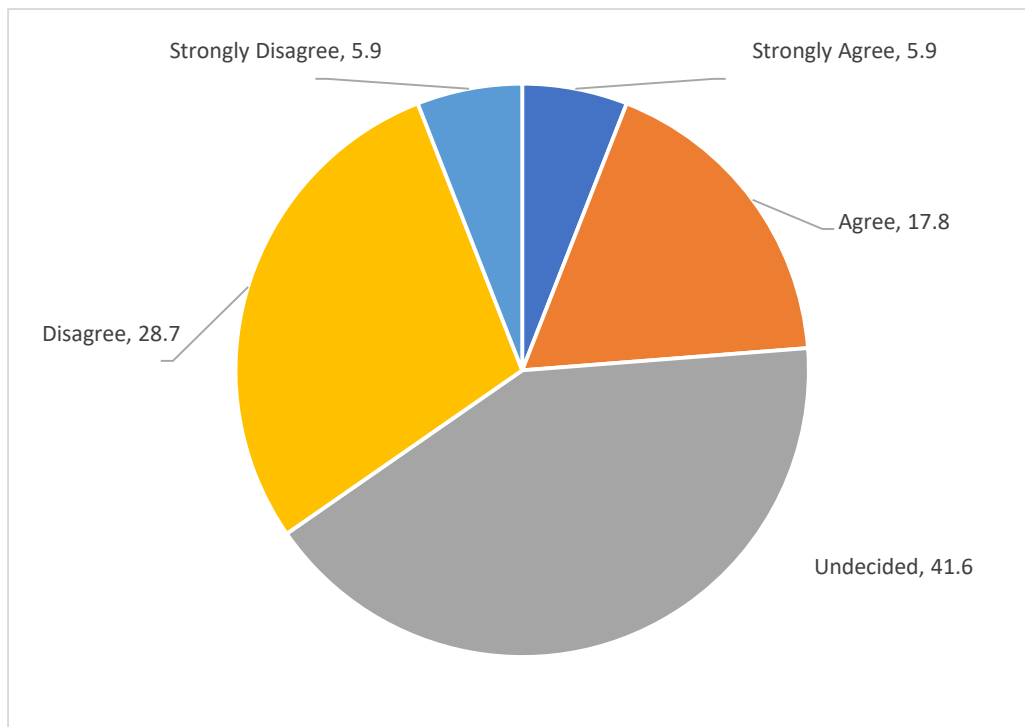
Regarding financial autonomy, Part Five of the Proclamation, Sub-article 38.1 states that the university will enjoy a gradually decreasing budget in the form of block grant until it becomes self-sufficient in addition to other forms of income generation. This gives the impression that the autonomous university is likely to stop receiving any budget from the government at any point in the future, unlike the social and societal responsibilities that governments have always to support public institutions that promote the public's interest.

As regards overall institutional autonomy, the two sub-articles mentioned in the proclamation, Articles 42 and 43, appear to be very dubious as they tend to empower the Ministry of Education and the Ethiopian Education and Training Authority (ETA) to still control the university. The former states that all roles and responsibilities about higher education given to the Ministry of Education may also apply to the autonomous university as deemed necessary. It does not state which is which, while the latter states that the roles and responsibilities of ETA regarding higher education will also apply to the autonomous university as appropriate. It does not specify which powers of the ETA will continue to apply to autonomous universities.

In a further quest to determine whether the newly introduced autonomy has the status of an international stature or not in terms of bench-marking international best practices as regards an ideal university autonomy expounded by international actors such as UNESCO and the European University Association (EUA), informants were asked to give their own opinions. Most of the informants, 41.6%, as the pie chart below shows, had a position that was just “undecided”, implying perhaps that there was no sufficient benchmarking made toward the autonomy introduced.

*Pie chart*

*Addis Ababa University's autonomy compared to international practices*



In sum, the critical scrutiny of the autonomy-granting proclamation revealed that there were limitations with a significant number of provisions regarding the four major dimensions of university autonomy: academic, organizational, personnel, and financial.

### **Universal Characteristics**

From the overall reactions of informants in this study and the public media outlets, it can be learned that concerns that normally arise during the time of a new reform do also surface in the Ethiopian context. Resistance to change, being skeptical as regards the government's commitment and full faculty engagement, financial constraints given that self-generation of revenue is likely to take quite a long time and a lot of effort and commitment, and poor overall capacity of the university to effectively implement autonomy were some of the serious concerns articulated by the informants.

A social media writer commented, "Universities prepare for the worst as the government grants autonomy" (Ashenafi, 2023). The same source highlighted how MPS, who endorsed the university autonomy granting bill, found it difficult to ensure a smooth political fraternal relationship between the three parties: the government, the ruling party, and public universities. This was another area of suspicion that informants had in this study. More profound concerns have also been voiced in personal email communications to the researcher, as one senior professor commented,

By the way, providing universities with autonomy is a good idea. However, we have to distinguish between the types of autonomy to which we refer. Is it administrative or governance autonomy, academic autonomy, or both? It could be all of them, but autonomy cannot be 100% because the universities are public. Under any autonomy, even private universities cannot teach only the curricula they want. All universities are made accountable for the needs of society. However, I fear the following: Doing things in haste before the required preparations are done may lead to catastrophic failures" (Extracted from a personal communication email).

Moreover, informants raised fear and reservations if the expected autonomy goes to the extent of ensuring, for instance, the capacity to choose the language of instruction, decisions regarding quality assurance issues, the capacity to select quality assurance agencies, quality assurance mechanisms, the right to keep a surplus, the right to independently borrow money, and the ability of universities to independently enter and decide on international cooperation schemes.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The following key conclusions and implications emerge from the above findings and discussion.

First, the notion of autonomy, unlike what was proposed in the Ethiopian context, must be seen within a broader context that has a moral and philosophical basis. University autonomy is an empowerment of faculty to develop their own skills and competencies as opposed to a tendency toward heteronomy where individual desires detached from what morality requires of us tend to interfere with. “*Autonomy is the capacity for self-government. Agents are autonomous if their actions are truly their own. So, true autonomy can easily seem to be a myth*” explains, the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (Blackburn, 2008). The same source elaborates that Autonomy is the ability to know what morality requires of us, and functions not as the freedom to pursue our ends, but as the power of an agent to act on objective and universally valid rules of conduct, certified by reason alone as different from heteronomy, which is the condition of acting on desires that are not legislated by reason. On campuses of universities, autonomy is a freedom that the faculty and the university community enjoy without any irrational restrictions on them to make decisions based on their talents, competencies, professional knowledge, and skills. Faculty are not imposed by any external pressure



on their responsible professional and expert decisions. Kenny (2012) and other prominent educators argue that autonomous institutions get the freedom to think, design, analyze, and create a curriculum and syllabus that meet their vision and mission statement. They further clarify that these institutions do not depend on any university or higher organization. They can move in the pursuit of their goals without any hassle! They are not forced to comply with traditional or religious denominations out of their own will and professional judgment. They teach and learn what they believe. However, all levels of freedom of making decisions are attached with commensurate levels of rationality, responsibility, and accountability to protect universities from abuse of power secured because of autonomy. The different forms of indirect restrictions or impositions made upon the four dimensions of university autonomy in the proclamation and discussed above, for instance, critically jeopardize the full essence of university autonomy. One could infer from the provisions in the proclamation that universities may not have a direct role in choosing their president (organizational autonomy), cannot independently develop their programs of study (academic autonomy), cannot fire an employee for ineffectiveness without consulting anyone outside the university (personnel autonomy), and may not borrow money independently from any international source (financial autonomy). From this it follows that concrete steps should be taken both by the government and the University to reach a clear workable, actionable and precise definition of autonomy. That definition should be broader and non-restrictive in the sense that the university community could play its academic and institutional responsibility freely and efficiently without any hindrance. The autonomy should be broader to the extent of empowering academic staff to develop their courses and curricula and should also empower the university to undertake its resource procurement without waiting for approval from senior ministry officials. Universities

should also have the right to secure funds from donors, raise funds from their revenues, and utilize the secured funds fully for their institutional purposes without being forced by external government authorities to meddle with their accounting and finance system.

Second, it should be underlined that the state should not assume the role of tight external legislative regulation but rather the role of external guidance and support. The exercise of academic autonomy could best and fully be managed both at the management and academic staff level by upholding the principles of independent academic inquiry, freedom of thought, and unwavering commitment to professions on behalf of the academic community and by having zero tolerance for meddling with trivial political issues either way, with the institution on one side and the government on the other. The government should have full commitment to this and should reflect the same in clearly stipulated open and accommodating legal provisions, which appear to be lacking at the present stage. This should continue more boldly than ever. Thus, the government should continue revisiting and revising some legislative articles that restrict the full autonomy of institutions, especially towards exercising academic freedom. From this, it follows that both the university and the government should revise restrictive Articles such as Article 8 & 9 in the Granting of University Autonomy Proclamation No. 1294/2023) for universities to enjoy responsible full autonomy.

Third, in a developing country, such as Ethiopia, it may be difficult to address the current problems faced by universities merely by implementing an autonomous governance structure copied from the West. Just like the claim made by some, that Africa needs to have its form of democracy instead of copying the Western mode of democracy (Nkrumah, 1965), other forms of indigenous forms of university governance that challenge the tenets of liberal democracy might be considered as options. Nkrumah (1965) sarcastically demonstrated the danger of such copying, stating:

... those countries of the Third World which are former colonies of the imperial powers should have accepted the western form of democracy as the ideal form of government is not at all surprising, for these colonies had been taught for generations to believe that the customs of their masters were the best in the world. So thorough has been the brainwashing that there are independent countries even today where the wearing of wigs in a tropical climate is regarded as an indispensable adjunct of the administration of justice.

The only difference here is that Ethiopia was not colonized by the Western powers. The governance structure should be established based on Ethiopia's peculiar situations, culture, indigenous, and anthropological realities.

Fourth, Africa has long been suffering from a lack of freedom and dictatorial political orders; the dream for optimal autonomy for universities to fully enjoy appears to be still far-fetched and needs viable mitigation strategies to come sooner. Even though the need for self-sufficiency via grant securing and internal revenue generation has a critical importance in the governance of autonomous universities, it was found to be equally important for the government to continue to back the University financially, and the support is especially critical during the formative phase of the new autonomy. From this, it follows that the government should continue to provide all the resources and management support the university needs throughout its implementation of the reform process for the latter to become a vibrant, robust autonomous public university that can be taken as an example for other universities in Ethiopia and universities in the horn of Africa.

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