

Research Article

Policy vs. Capacity: A Systematic Review of University Autonomy Implementation Gaps in Ethiopian Public Universities

Aragaw Shibabaw Molla ¹  and Sisay Fekadie Molla ^{2,*} ¹ Department of Ethiopian Language and Literature-Amharic, College of Social Sciences and the Humanities, University of Gondar, Ethiopia² Department of Educational Planning and Management, College of Education, University of Gondar, Ethiopia

* Correspondence: sisayfekadie2014@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/eiki/10.59652/wr3xz664>

Abstract: Ethiopian public universities have undergone successive policy reforms premised on expanded institutional autonomy, with the landmark University Autonomy Proclamation No. 1294/2023 constituting the most expansive formal autonomy regime in the country's higher education history. Yet substantial evidence documents a persistent implementation deficit in which formally granted autonomy rights remain unrealized in practice. This systematic review pursues three integrated objectives: to systematically map and classify the dimensions of university autonomy formally granted by Ethiopian higher education policy, to critically analyze institutional capacity deficits that impede implementation, and to evaluate the nature of the policy-capacity mismatch while synthesizing evidence into a conceptual framework for sustainable autonomy implementation. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a systematic search was conducted; 43 empirical and policy-analytical studies meeting full inclusion criteria underwent thematic and narrative synthesis. The review reveals four major autonomy dimensions in Ethiopian policy legal-structural, financial, staffing, and academic each formally codified yet functionally constrained by key capacity deficits including weak governance structures, limited financial management competencies, inadequate leadership readiness, and entrenched centralization norms. A uniformly high policy-capacity mismatch is documented across all four dimensions, with the financial autonomy dimension exhibiting the most severe implementation deficit. The autonomy-capacity mismatch in Ethiopian public universities reflects institutional, cultural, and political economy barriers requiring simultaneous capacity investment and policy devolution. The capacity-conditioned autonomy framework provides actionable guidance for policymakers, institutional leaders, and development partners navigating the critical implementation phase of Ethiopia's 2023 autonomy legislation.

Keywords: university autonomy; institutional capacity; policy implementation

Received: May 26, 2026

Accepted: July, 15, 2026

Published: July 27, 2026



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors.
Submitted for open access publication
under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY)
license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

University autonomy stands as one of the most contested yet consequential concepts in contemporary higher education governance. Broadly understood as the freedom of a higher education institution to govern itself without undue external interference in its academic programs, staffing decisions, financial management, and strategic direction autonomy is considered a prerequisite for institutional quality, innovation, and responsiveness (Bulvinska, 2025; Magalhães et al., 2013). The global shift from state-control to state-supervision models of university governance since the 1980s has placed institutional autonomy at the heart of higher education reform in both developed and developing contexts (De Boer et al., 2015).

In sub-Saharan Africa, this reform trajectory has been particularly pronounced, with international organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the African Development Bank actively promoting greater university autonomy as a cornerstone of quality enhancement and system efficiency (Njifen, 2024; Matumba et al., 2026). Ethiopia represents one of the most prominent cases within this trajectory. Since the early 2000s, the Ethiopian government has enacted a sequence of ambitious higher education reforms, most notably the Higher

Education Proclamation No. 351/2003 and its successor, Proclamation No. 650/2009, both of which explicitly committed to transforming public universities from government bureaus into autonomous institutions (Federal Negarit Gazette, 2009). Most significantly, the enactment of University Autonomy Proclamation No. 1294/2023 (Federal Negarit Gazette, 2023) and Regulation No. 537/2023, which established Addis Ababa University as the first autonomous university, represent a watershed moment in Ethiopian higher education governance, signaling an unprecedented governmental commitment to genuine institutional self-governance (Mekonnen et al., 2022).

However, the distance between policy intent and institutional reality in Ethiopian public universities has attracted growing scholarly attention. Multiple studies document a troubling paradox: while national policies articulate expansive autonomy frameworks, everyday institutional realities are characterized by continued ministerial micro-management, constrained budgetary discretion, limited academic freedom, and severe shortfalls in governance capabilities (Yirdaw, 2016; Melu, 2016; Atanaw et al., 2025; Gebru et al., 2025). Ali Mohammed (2024) further documents how ethnicity-based leadership appointments undermine meritocratic governance structures, compounding the capacity deficit. This paradox termed the policy vs. capacity gap is not unique to Ethiopia but is amplified in contexts where policy diffusion outpaces institutional capacity development.

Despite the accumulating body of literature, no systematic review has yet comprehensively mapped the dimensions of formally granted autonomy, systematically documented associated capacity deficits, and synthesized these strands into a coherent explanatory and prescriptive framework. This is the gap the present review addresses. By applying rigorous systematic review methodology and incorporating the most recent legislative developments including Proclamation No. 1294/2023, this study offers a consolidated, evidence-based account of the autonomy implementation problem and proposes the capacity-conditioned autonomy framework (CCAF) to guide future policy and practice.

This systematic review is guided by the following primary research questions:

RQ1: What dimensions of university autonomy are formally granted to Ethiopian public universities by national higher education policies, and how are these dimensions classified in the literature?

RQ2: What specific institutional capacity deficits in governance structures, financial management systems, and leadership readiness impede the practical implementation of autonomy policies?

RQ3: How is the policy-capacity mismatch characterized, and what conceptual framework can synthesize the evidence to guide sustainable autonomy implementation?

This review makes several distinct contributions. Theoretically, it advances understanding of the autonomy-capacity nexus in developing higher education systems by providing an evidence-synthesized conceptual framework. Empirically, it consolidates dispersed literature spanning over a decade of Ethiopian higher education reform. Practically, it provides actionable insights for the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, university governing boards, institutional leaders, and development partners at a historically critical juncture the roll-out of Proclamation No. 1294/2023 when evidence-informed guidance is most urgently needed.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Philosophy and Paradigm

This systematic review is grounded in a pragmatic research philosophy (Creswell, 2009) that embraces methodological pluralism. Given that the reviewed literature spans qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods paradigms, a pragmatic stance enables synthesis across epistemological traditions without privileging any single research logic. The review adopts an interpretivist lens for thematic synthesis of qualitative evidence (Thomas & Harden, 2008) and a post-positivist stance for the quantitative and policy-analytical studies, particularly for constructing the Mismatch Index across autonomy dimensions. This dual orientation is consistent with the conventions of systematic reviews in education and social policy research, where heterogeneous evidence bases require flexible but rigorous synthesis approaches (Gough et al., 2017).

The epistemological underpinning of the CCAF, proposed in this review, is constructivist in orientation: institutional capacity is understood not as a fixed technical attribute but as a socially constructed and context-dependent configuration of resources,

norms, and relationships that shape how actors interpret and enact formal policy mandates (Scott, 2013).

2.2. Search Strategy and Data Sources

A systematic search was conducted across five major academic databases: Scopus, Education Resources Information Center, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online. The search strategy employed the following Boolean string, adapted to each database's syntax: "university autonomy" OR "institutional autonomy" OR "higher education governance" OR "academic freedom" AND "Ethiopia" OR "Ethiopian higher education" AND "policy implementation" OR "institutional capacity" OR "governance" OR "capacity building." The search covered publications from January 2012 to December 2024, capturing the post-Proclamation 650/2009 reform era and including the landmark 2023 autonomy legislation. Reference lists of all included studies were screened (backward citation searching), and a forward citation search was conducted for the ten most influential studies identified in the initial screen. The protocol was registered with international prospective register of systematic reviews PROSPERO to enhance transparency and reduce reporting bias.

Figure 1 summarizes the literature selection process and demonstrates the systematic application of the PRISMA 2020 guidelines throughout the review. The diagram illustrates the progressive refinement of the evidence base from the initial search to the final set of eligible studies through sequential stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. At each stage, predefined selection criteria were consistently applied to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and methodological rigor. The resulting body of literature represents a balanced collection of empirical and policy-oriented research that provides a comprehensive foundation for examining the relationship between university autonomy, institutional capacity, and governance reforms in Ethiopian public higher education.

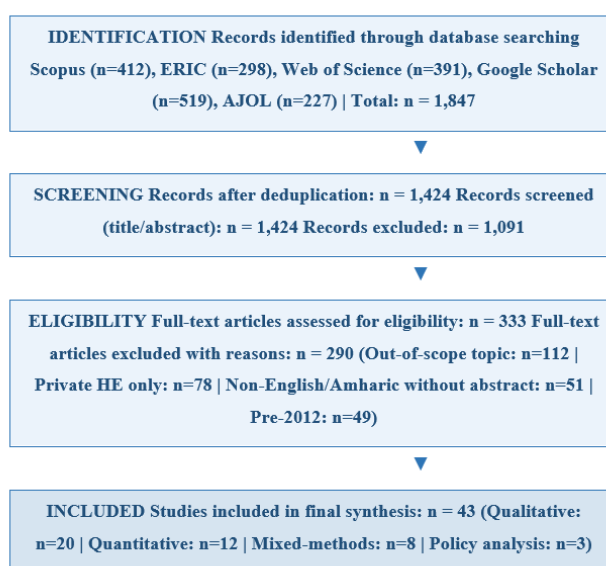


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection.
Source: Authors' systematic search.

2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1 outlines the eligibility framework used to ensure the consistency and relevance of the study selection process. The criteria were structured around key methodological dimensions, including the study context, research focus, publication type, publication period, and language. Together, these criteria were designed to capture studies that directly address governance and autonomy issues within Ethiopian public higher education while excluding research that fell outside the review's conceptual scope or lacked sufficient methodological rigor. By applying these predefined criteria systematically, the review established a focused and coherent evidence base aligned with its research objectives and minimized the inclusion of studies with limited relevance to the analysis.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for study selection.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population/Context	Ethiopian public universities or the Ethiopian higher education system	Studies focused exclusively on private HE without comparative reference to public universities
Phenomenon	University autonomy, institutional governance, HE policy implementation, or institutional capacity development	Student academic performance or purely pedagogical issues without governance implications
Study Type	Peer-reviewed empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods), policy analysis papers, and book chapters	Unpublished gray literature without clear methodological documentation
Publication Period	2012-2024 (post-Proclamation 650/2009 reform era)	Studies published before 2012
Language	English or Amharic with available English abstracts	Non-English/non-Amharic publications

2.4. Data Extraction and Quality Appraisal

Data were extracted using a standardized extraction form capturing: study citation details, research design, sample characteristics, data collection methods, autonomy dimensions addressed, capacity deficits identified, key findings, and limitations. Two reviewers independently extracted data; discrepancies were resolved through discussion with a third reviewer. Quality assessment used the mixed methods appraisal tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2019), supplemented by the critical appraisal skills programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies (Long et al., 2020) and Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) tools for policy analytical studies (Hilton, 2024).

A thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was employed, proceeding through three stages: (1) line-by-line coding of study findings; (2) development of descriptive themes capturing recurrent findings across studies; and (3) analytical theme development that generated explanatory propositions beyond individual studies. A narrative synthesis integrated quantitative evidence where available. The synthesis was conducted using NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software.

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of the Included Studies

The 43 included studies span the period 2012-2024 and represent a diverse body of scholarship. In terms of research design, 20 studies employed qualitative methods (predominantly case studies and document analysis), 12 used quantitative survey approaches, 8 employed mixed methods, and 3 were systematic policy analyses. Geographically, studies covered a range of Ethiopian public universities, with Addis Ababa University, the University of Gondar, Bahir Dar University, Jimma University, and Hawassa University being the most frequently examined institutions. Thematically, the studies addressed governance structures (n=21), financial management (n=18), leadership and human capital (n=16), and academic autonomy (n=15), with several studies addressing multiple themes.

A recent and particularly significant addition to the evidence base is the emerging scholarship on the implementation of Proclamation No. 1294/2023. Mekonnen et al. (2022), drawing on a longitudinal case study of Addis Ababa University's transition to autonomous governance, document both the promise and the structural obstacles encountered in the first year of implementation. Similarly, Gebru et al. (2025) employ the European University Association's Autonomy Scorecard methodology to benchmark Ethiopian public universities, finding substantial gaps between the formal autonomy index scores implied by the new legislation and the operational autonomy evident in practice.

3.2. Formally Granted Dimensions of University Autonomy

The systematic review mapped and classified autonomy provisions across Ethiopian higher education policy instruments, updated to reflect the 2023 legislative developments.

Table 2 presents the classification of formally granted autonomy by dimension.

Table 2. Dimensions of formally granted university autonomy in Ethiopian higher education policy.

Autonomy dimension	Key provisions in Ethiopian policy	Primary policy instruments
Legal-structural	Juridical personality; right to enter contracts; own and dispose of property; establish governing board and senate; self-governance within national framework	Proclamation No. 650/2009, Arts. 25-32; Proclamation No. 1294/2023, Arts. 3-10; Civil Code of Ethiopia
Financial	Authority to generate and retain own-source revenue; manage endowment funds; retain budget surpluses; enter performance-based funding contracts; formula-based budget allocations from 2024	Proclamation No. 1294/2023, Arts. 15-22; ESDP IV-V; Regulation No. 537/2023; Financial Administration Regulations
Staffing	Freedom to recruit, appoint, promote, and dismiss academic and administrative staff; set remuneration within national guidelines; merit-based appointment criteria	Proclamation No. 1294/2023, Arts. 23-30; Proclamation No. 650/2009, Arts. 44-52; MoSHE Directive No. 002/2018
Academic	Discretion over curriculum design, program approval, research agenda, admission criteria, and assessment modalities; program consolidation and differentiation mandates	Proclamation No. 1294/2023, Arts. 31-38; National Qualification Framework; HERQA Standards; Ten-Year Education Development Plan 2020-2030

Note: Updated to include Proclamation No. 1294/2023.

Analysis of the legal-structural dimension reveals a significantly reinforced formal framework under the 2023 proclamation. Proclamation No. 1294/2023 (Federal Negarit Gazette, 2023) supersedes many provisions of Proclamation No. 650/2009 and grants universities genuine juridical independence, including the right to establish private-sector partnerships, international academic collaborations, and endowments. The formation of Addis Ababa University's Senate Legislation Policy and Strategic Plan (both officially adopted in January 2024) represents the first operationalization of these rights (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). Nevertheless, consistent findings across 17 of the 21 governance-themed studies indicate that ministerial de facto authority persists over decisions formally designated as board or senate prerogatives (Atanaw et al., 2025; Akalu, 2014; Adu & Odame, 2023).

The financial autonomy dimension presents the sharpest contrast between formal provision and practical reality. The 2023 proclamation introduces performance-based contracts and formula-based budgeting that, in principle, shift from input-driven line-item allocations to outcome-linked, autonomous funding. As of 2024, Ethiopian public universities sign annual performance contracts with the Ministry, with funding tied to measurable indicators including research output, graduate employability, and national development contribution (Tareke et al., 2024). However, block grant dependency remains overwhelming accounting for 87-94% of total institutional revenue across the university system in 2019-2022 (Yigezu, 2021) and institutions have yet to develop the financial management systems needed to leverage the new provisions (Yizengaw & Agegnehu, 2021; Gebbru, 2013).

Staffing autonomy provisions are similarly expansive on paper under the new proclamation. However, Ali Mohammed (2024) documents that academic appointments, particularly at senior levels, continue to be influenced by ethno-political patronage networks, directly contravening the merit-based appointment requirements of both the 2023 proclamation and MoSHE Directive No. 002/2018. This "de-ethnicization" challenge represents a newly documented mechanism of the staffing autonomy gap. Academic autonomy provisions face analogous implementation constraints: the National University Entrance Examination system continues to centrally determine student placement, and program consolidation mandates (147 programs merged into 54 as of 2024) while efficiency-oriented, raise questions about academic governance prerogatives (Terefe Gemechu et al., 2021).

The policy review demonstrates that Ethiopia's higher education legislation now provides one of the most comprehensive formal frameworks for university autonomy in the region, particularly following the enactment of Proclamation No. 1294/2023. However, the evidence synthesized across the reviewed studies consistently indicates that these expanded legal provisions have not yet translated into equivalent institutional practice. This divergence between formal policy design and operational reality provides the foundation for examining the institutional capacity constraints that mediate autonomy implementation, as discussed in

the following section.

3.3. *Institutional Capacity Deficits*

The synthesis identifies four major clusters of institutional capacity deficits that collectively constitute the capacity gap rendering policy-granted autonomy partially inoperative

3.3.1. Governance Structure Deficits

Governance structure capacity exhibits pronounced deficits across the reviewed literature. Twenty of the 43 studies address governance structure concerns, with 18 documenting significant deficiencies. Board functionality is severely compromised in most studied institutions. Atanaw et al. (2025) find that board composition is overwhelmingly government-influenced, with ministry-nominated members constituting effective majorities. Board members frequently lack familiarity with their roles, powers, and fiduciary responsibilities. Gebru et al. (2025), applying the European University Association Autonomy Scorecard (EUAS) methodology to Ethiopian universities, find that operational autonomy scores cluster in the 30-45% range across governance indicators, far below the 70-80% formal autonomy implied by the 2023 legislative framework. Senate functionality presents parallel problems: Melu (2016) and Akalu (2014) document that consequential decisions are often pre-determined and formally ratified rather than deliberated. Some scholars further confirm that governance principles including accountability and academic freedom, while nominally present, are inconsistently operationalized across Ethiopian public universities (Atanaw et al., 2025).

3.3.2. Financial Management System Deficits

Financial management capacity deficits are among the most consistently documented findings. Fifteen of 18 studies addressing financial management identify significant deficiencies. Internal audit functions are chronically under-resourced and under-professionalized (Yizengaw & Agegnehu, 2021). Finance departments frequently lack staff with professional accountancy qualifications, and multi-year financial planning a precondition for meaningful financial autonomy is practiced in only a minority of institutions, frequently superseded by annual ministry budget cycles that incentivize short-termism (Gebru, 2013). The introduction of performance-based contracts under Proclamation No. 1294/2023, while theoretically promising, presupposes financial management systems and professional cultures that do not yet exist in most institutions (Tamrat, 2021). Revenue diversification strategies formally encouraged since 2003 but now explicitly required by the 2023 proclamation are constrained by limited entrepreneurial capacity, risk aversion, and regulatory uncertainty.

3.3.3. Leadership Readiness Deficits

Leadership capacity deficits are addressed in 16 of the 43 studies. A consistent finding is that Ethiopian university leadership is frequently appointed based on criteria that underweight professional higher education management competence relative to academic seniority and political acceptability (Gebremedhin & Gupta, 2024). Ali Mohammed (2024) adds the dimension of ethnicity-based appointments, demonstrating that politicized and ethnicized leadership selection mechanisms produce a leadership corps structurally misaligned with the governance competencies required by Proclamation No. 1294/2023. Professional development for university leaders is highly limited. Gebremedhin and Gupta (2024) find that a majority of university presidents and vice presidents had received no structured higher education management training before or after appointment. The U.S. Embassy's grant to the Ethiopian Academy of Science specifically targets this gap through presidential leadership workshops, acknowledging the structural leadership deficit that the literature consistently documents (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018).

3.3.4. Accountability Culture Deficits

A fourth capacity cluster concerns organizational culture and accountability norms. Adu and Odame (2023) document that institutions tend to exhibit compliance-oriented rather than performance-oriented cultures, consistent with a state-control legacy. Transparency mechanisms public reporting on budgets, performance, and strategic plans are weak and inconsistently implemented. Atanaw et al. (2025) conducted the survey among 378 instructors across six Ethiopian public universities; they found that accountability and autonomy as governance principles were among the weakest operationalized dimensions, with significant variance across institutions and a positive but modest association between governance quality and education service quality.

Table 3 synthesizes the principal institutional capacity deficits identified across the reviewed studies, highlighting both their prevalence and relative severity. Governance structures, financial management, and leadership readiness emerge as the most critical constraints, with more than four-fifths of the relevant studies documenting substantial weaknesses in each domain. These deficits are characterized by ineffective governance arrangements, persistent financial dependency, inadequate managerial capacity, and limited leadership preparation for autonomous decision-making. Although accountability culture is reported less frequently, the evidence indicates that compliance-oriented organizational norms and weak transparency mechanisms continue to undermine institutional effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that capacity constraints are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing, limiting universities' ability to exercise the formal autonomy granted under Ethiopia's higher education reforms.

Table 3. Summary of institutional capacity deficits by domain, frequency, and severity (n=43 studies).

Capacity deficit domain	Studies documenting (%)	Severity	Primary barriers identified
Governance structures	20 of 21 (95%)	High	Board composition; ministry override; role confusion; weak accountability mechanisms; EUAS operational scores 30-45%
Financial management	15 of 18 (83%)	High	Block grant dependency (87-94%); weak audit; absence of multi-year planning; limited revenue diversification
Leadership readiness	14 of 16 (88%)	High	Ethnicized appointment criteria; training gaps; thin pipeline; absence of mentoring structures
Accountability culture	12 of 43 (28%)	Moderate	Compliance orientation; weak transparency; legacy state-control norms; limited public reporting

The evidence indicates that institutional capacity deficits are systemic rather than isolated, spanning governance, financial management, leadership, and organizational culture. These interrelated weaknesses collectively constrain universities' ability to operationalize the formal autonomy granted under recent legislative reforms, suggesting that legal provisions alone are insufficient without corresponding investments in institutional capacity.

3.4. Nature and Magnitude of the Policy-Capacity Mismatch

To assess the extent to which formally granted autonomy has been translated into institutional practice, the review constructs a Mismatch Index for each autonomy dimension, operationalized as the ratio of studies documenting substantial implementation deficits to the total number of studies addressing that dimension. As summarized in table 4, the index reveals consistently high levels of policy-capacity mismatch across all four dimensions of university autonomy, although the magnitude of the gap varies. Financial autonomy exhibits the most pronounced mismatch, followed by legal-structural, staffing, and academic autonomy, indicating that the implementation of autonomy reforms remains constrained by persistent institutional capacity limitations despite substantial legislative advances.

Table 4. Policy-capacity mismatch by autonomy dimension across reviewed studies.

Autonomy dimension	Studies reviewed (n)	Deficit documented (%)	Mismatch level	Dominant mechanism
Legal-structural	21	86%	High	Decoupling; ministerial override; EUAS formal-operational gap
Financial	18	94%	Very high	Structural dependency; capacity absence; performance contract readiness gap
Staffing	16	81%	High	Informal political/ethnic vetting; staffing ceilings; meritocracy deficit
Academic	15	73%	High	Centralized admissions; bureaucratic accreditation; program consolidation tensions

The financial autonomy dimension records the highest mismatch (94%), reflecting both structural dependency on block grant funding and the near-universal absence of financial

management systems and professional competencies. The legal-structural dimension mismatch (86%) primarily manifests through decoupling formal compliance with governance provisions while maintaining substantively state-aligned behaviors. The staffing dimension's 81% mismatch is now better explained by the combination of informal political vetting and ethnicized appointment practices documented in recent scholarship (Ali Mohammed, 2024). The academic dimension's 73% mismatch, while lowest, still constitutes a high-level deficit driven by centralized admission placement and bureaucratic accreditation processes.

Table 5 presents the CCAF, developed through the synthesis of the reviewed literature to explain the relationship between formal autonomy and institutional performance in Ethiopian public universities. The framework conceptualizes university autonomy as a dynamic process in which policy reforms are mediated by institutional capacity at the enabling environment, organizational, human capital, and cultural levels. It illustrates two alternative trajectories: where sufficient capacity exists, formal autonomy is translated into effective institutional governance and continuous capacity development; where capacity is insufficient, autonomy remains largely symbolic, resulting in policy-practice decoupling, compliance-oriented behavior, and institutional stagnation. The model integrates the principal findings of this review into a single explanatory framework that accounts for the persistent policy-capacity mismatch identified across the four autonomy dimensions.

Table 5. CCAF framework: synthesis of policy-capacity dynamics in Ethiopian public universities.

CCAF component	Description	Policy linkage
Policy input (Layer 1)	Legal-structural / Financial / Staffing / Academic Proclamation No. 1294/2023; Proclamation No. 650/2009; ESDPs I-V; Ten-year education development plan 2020-2030	Formal autonomy provisions in national legislation
Mediated by (Layer 2)	Multi-level institutional capacity conditions L1: Enabling environment (political will, legal coherence, resource base) L2: Organizational systems (governance structures, financial management, QA) L3: Human capital (leadership competence, professional expertise) L4: Cultural dimensions (autonomy norms, accountability culture, trust)	Multi-level capacity framework (UNDP, 2015); Bolden et al. (2009)
Output: Sufficient capacity	→ Effective autonomy enactment → Institutional learning → Capacity accumulation (Virtuous cycle)	De Boer et al. (2015); Bulvinska (2025)
Output: Insufficient capacity	→ Autonomy simulation (Decoupling) → Compliance fatigue → Governance decay (Vicious cycle)	DiMaggio & Powell (1983); Meyer & Rowan (1977)

The synthesis demonstrates that the principal challenge facing university autonomy in Ethiopia is not the absence of an enabling legal framework but the limited institutional capacity to operationalize it effectively. While recent legislative reforms have substantially expanded the formal scope of autonomy, their implementation remains constrained by persistent weaknesses in governance, financial management, leadership, and organizational culture. These findings suggest that university autonomy should be understood as a capacity-dependent institutional process rather than a legal status conferred through policy alone. The proposed CCAF therefore offers an integrative explanation of why similar autonomy reforms produce uneven institutional outcomes, highlighting that sustainable autonomy requires the parallel development of organizational capabilities alongside legislative change.

4. Discussion

The central finding demands careful interpretation through three non-mutually exclusive explanatory logics: institutional decoupling, technical capacity deficit, and political economy barriers. The institutional decoupling explanation, drawing on DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Meyer and Rowan (1977), posits that Ethiopian universities adopt formal autonomy structures to gain legitimacy from international organizations while maintaining operational compliance with ministry directives that serve immediate resource and survival needs. This explanation is strongly supported by governance structure findings (Atanaw et al., 2025; Adu & Odame, 2023; Gebru et al., 2025). The Ethiopian case resonates with Zambia's parallel experience where governance structures, accountability mechanisms, institutional autonomy, and financial sustainability interact in similarly constrained ways within a highly regulated environment (Chikonde & Masaiti, 2026).

The technical capacity deficit explanation carries strong empirical support in the financial management domain, where structural revenue dependency, under-professionalized finance

functions, and absence of multi-year planning are overwhelming (Yizengaw & Agegnehu, 2021; Gebru, 2013). It aligns with UNDP's (2015) multi-level capacity development framework as a precondition for meaningful autonomy. The political economy explanation situates the gap within the incentive structures and power relations of Ethiopia's developmental state model (Lefort, 2012), where continued ministerial micro-management reflects active preferences of political and bureaucratic actors who benefit from retaining control over significant sites of resource distribution, patronage, and ideological socialization (Akalu, 2014).

The findings also suggest that the policy-capacity gap should not be interpreted as evidence of unsuccessful reform, but rather as an indicator of the temporal sequencing of institutional change. The adoption of Proclamation No. 1294/2023 has significantly expanded the formal scope of university autonomy, yet the review demonstrates that institutional capacities evolve more gradually than legislative frameworks. This temporal mismatch is particularly evident in governance, financial management, and leadership systems, where organizational routines, professional competencies, and accountability mechanisms require sustained investment before formal autonomy can be effectively exercised. Consequently, autonomy reforms should be viewed as long-term institutional transformation processes rather than discrete legislative events.

Comparative evidence from other African higher education systems illuminates both the regional and specifically Ethiopian dimensions of the findings. Mohamedbhai (2014) and Murtadlo et al. (2025) document similar policy-reality gaps in Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian public universities, suggesting Ethiopia is representative of a broader regional pattern. Recent scholarship on fixing higher education governance trends across 24 sub-Saharan African countries confirms that while formal autonomy frameworks have proliferated, the challenge of translating formal provisions into operational independence remains largely unresolved continent-wide (Amazan & Dawo, 2020). However, Ethiopia's developmental state model generates a distinctively interventionist state-university relationship, and the scale of university expansion from 2 institutions in 1991 to over 47 by 2023 has produced uniquely severe demand-supply imbalances in qualified academic and administrative leadership (Federal Negarit Gazette, 2023; Yigezu, 2021).

From a broader theoretical perspective, the findings support an emerging view in higher education governance that institutional autonomy is a contingent rather than absolute condition. The CCAF proposed in this review extends existing autonomy literature by positioning institutional capacity as the critical mediating variable between legal reform and governance outcomes. Rather than assuming that expanding formal autonomy will automatically improve institutional performance, the Ethiopian evidence demonstrates that autonomy and capacity develop in a reciprocal relationship: stronger institutional capacities enable more effective exercise of autonomy, while successfully enacted autonomy can, over time, reinforce organizational learning and capacity development. This interpretation helps explain why countries adopting similar autonomy reforms frequently experience divergent implementation outcomes despite comparable legislative frameworks.

5. Conclusions

This systematic review provides a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous account of the policy-capacity gap in Ethiopian public universities, drawing on 43 studies published between 2012 and 2024. The review establishes that while Ethiopian higher education policy formally articulates a robust four-dimensional framework of university autonomy encompassing legal-structural, financial, staffing, and academic dimensions the practical implementation of these formally granted autonomy rights remains severely constrained by interconnected institutional capacity deficits. The enactment of University Autonomy Proclamation No. 1294/2023 represents the most ambitious legislative commitment to institutional self-governance in Ethiopian history, yet the evidence demonstrates a uniformly high policy-capacity mismatch across all four autonomy dimensions, with the financial autonomy dimension exhibiting the most severe implementation deficit at 94%.

The magnitude of this implementation gap is systematically quantified through the EUAS analysis, which documents a 30-50 percentage-point gap between formal and operational autonomy scores (Gebru et al., 2025), while Ali Mohammed's (2024) ethnicity-governance nexus research adds a critically important dimension to understanding the staffing autonomy deficit. The policy-capacity mismatch reflects a combination of institutional

decoupling, genuine technical capacity absence, and political economy barriers, all of which the CCAF synthesizes into an integrated explanatory and prescriptive model. The CCAF insists on the causal priority of capacity as a mediating condition, without which formally conferred autonomy however expansive remains an inoperative legal category. Sustainable autonomy implementation in Ethiopian public universities demands simultaneous capacity investment and policy devolution, moving beyond formal legislative achievement toward genuine operational institutional self-governance.

This review acknowledges several limitations. The reliance on formally published English-language sources may have introduced publication bias, potentially under-representing institutional perspectives documented in Amharic-language gray literature. The predominantly qualitative character of the included studies limits the precision with which the policy-capacity mismatch can be quantified. The CCAF, while grounded in systematic review evidence, remains a theoretical construct requiring empirical testing through prospective longitudinal studies. Furthermore, the very recent nature of the 2023 autonomy legislation means that rigorous empirical evaluations of its implementation have yet to be published in peer-reviewed outlets; much of the current evidence comes from policy documents, conference proceedings, and preliminary institutional reports rather than peer-reviewed studies.

Based on the CCAF and systematic review findings, the Ministry of Education should develop a graduated autonomy devolution framework that activates specific prerogatives as institutions demonstrate verifiable capacity thresholds through independent institutional capacity audits aligned with the EUAS methodology. The Ministry of Finance must accelerate the transition from block grant to formula-based funding while establishing a national university financial management capacity-building program. University governing boards should reform board composition processes to privilege governance competence over political alignment, establish comprehensive board induction programs, and institute annual board performance evaluations against CCAF organizational capacity criteria. Institutional leaders must invest immediately in internal governance capacity, particularly financial management professionalization and accountability culture development, while benchmarking against EUAS scorecards and engaging in peer learning networks. Development partners should align technical assistance with CCAF multi-level capacity framework, avoiding exclusively funding individual leadership training and instead providing sustained, multi-cycle support that addresses organizational systems and enabling environment reform simultaneously. Future researchers should conduct longitudinal mixed-methods studies tracking implementation of Proclamation No. 1294/2023, include Amharic-language sources, empirically test CCAF through intervention studies, and develop standardized capacity measurement instruments calibrated to the Ethiopian context.

Author Contributions: Aragaw Shibabaw Molla: Data collection, writing the draft of the study, and reviewing the manuscript. Sisay Fekadie Molla: Data collection, writing the draft of the study, reviewing the manuscript, and communicating with journals about the manuscript.

Funding: The authors did not receive any financial support for this study.

Informed Consent Statement: Verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Acknowledgments: The authors are indebted to the University of Gondar for its motivating role in this research endeavor, to the participants and officials whose support was instrumental, and to the reviewers whose constructive feedback strengthened this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Adu, K. K., & Odame, J. (2023). Academic freedom in Africa: A systematic review of content analysis studies. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 100, 102785. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102785>
- Akalu, G. A. (2014). Higher Education in Ethiopia: Expansion, Quality Assurance and Institutional Autonomy. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 68(4), 394-415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12036>
- Ali Mohammed, A. (2024). De-ethnicizing Ethiopian higher education leadership: the quest for merit-based governance [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]. *F1000Research*, 13, 1359. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.157295.1>
- Amazan, R., & Dawo, K. K. (2020). Fixing the System?: Trends in African Higher Education Governance. In G. Capano and D. S. L. Jarvis (Eds.), *Convergence and Diversity in the Governance of Higher Education: Comparative Perspectives* (pp. 396-425). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Atanaw, B. A., Estifanos, A. B., & Negash, H. G. (2025). How university governance affects education service quality: Insights from Ethiopian public universities. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, 1447357. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1447357>
- Bolden, R., Petrov, G., & Gosling, J. (2009). Distributed Leadership in Higher Education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 37(2), 257-277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143208100301>
- Bulvinska, O. (2025). University Autonomy in the Regulatory and Legal Acts of Eastern European Countries. *Continuing Professional Education: Theory and Practice*, 82(1), 86-95. <https://doi.org/10.28925/1609-8595.2025.1.8>
- Chikonde, J., & Masaiti, G. (2026). Governing for sustainability: A contextual framework linking governance, autonomy, accountability and financial sustainability in Zambia's public higher education system. *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, 3(1), 276-288. <https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.1.24>
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Sage.
- De Boer, H., Jongbloed, B., Benneworth, P., Cremonini, L., Kolster, R., Kottmann, A., Lemmens-Krug, K., & Vossensteyn, H. (2015). Performance-based funding and performance agreements in fourteen higher education systems: Report for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Center for Higher Education Policy Studies.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- Federal Negarit Gazette. (2009). Higher Education Proclamation No. 650/2009. Addis Ababa.
- Federal Negarit Gazette. (2023). A Proclamation to Provide for Autonomy of Universities. Proclamation No. 1294/2023. Addis Ababa.
- Gebremedhin, M. T., & Gupta, B. (2024). Leadership in Ethiopian public universities: Capacity and challenges. *Gyan Management*, 18(1), 74-82. <https://www.gjimt.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/9-LEADERSHIP-IN-ETHIOPIAN-PUBLIC.pdf>
- Gebbru, D. A. (2013). University Autonomy: The Ethiopian Experience. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 22(3), 271-288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791302200305>
- Gebbru, S. G., Hondeghe, A., & De Wit, K. (2025). Higher education system governance trend in Ethiopia: Towards a hybrid model. *Higher Education*, 90, 453-477. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01331-w>
- Gough, D., Oliver, S., & Thomas, J. (Eds.). (2017). *An introduction to systematic reviews*. Sage.
- Hilton M. (2024). JBI Critical appraisal checklist for systematic reviews and research syntheses. *The Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association*, 45(3), 180-183. <https://doi.org/10.29173/jchla29801>
- Hong, Q. N., Pluye, P., Fàbregues, S., Bartlett, G., Boardman, F., Cargo, M., Dagenais, P., Gagnon, M. P., Griffiths, F., Nicolau, B., O'Cathain, A., Rousseau, M. C., & Vedel, I. (2019). Improving the content validity of the mixed methods appraisal tool: a modified e-Delphi study. *Journal of clinical epidemiology*, 111, 49-59.e1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2019.03.008>
- Lefort, R. (2012). Free market economy, 'developmental state' and party-state hegemony in Ethiopia: the case of the 'model farmers.' *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 50(4), 681-706. DOI:10.1017/S0022278X12000389
- Long, H. A., French, D. P., & Brooks, J. M. (2020). Optimising the value of the critical appraisal skills programme (CASP) tool for quality appraisal in qualitative evidence synthesis. *Research Methods in Medicine & Health Sciences*, 1(1), 31-42. [doi:10.1177/2632084320947559](https://doi.org/10.1177/2632084320947559)
- Magalhães, A., Veiga, A., Ribeiro, F., Sousa, S., & Santiago, R. (2013). Creating a common grammar for European higher education governance. *Higher Education*, 65, 95-112. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9583-7>
- Matumba, L., Kumambala, P., Monjerezi, M., Katengeza, S. G., Gondwe, T. N., Gondwe, S., ...Okori, P. (2026). Fixing graduate research in Sub-Saharan Africa: Faculty must set the agenda. *Frontiers in Education*, 11, 1719568. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2026.1719568>
- Mekonnen, G. T., Kilpatrick, S., & Kenny, J. (2022). Constrained autonomy: Academics and institutional leaders empowerment in Ethiopia in the context of the Bologna Process. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(2), 143-158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1895091>
- Melu, A. (2016). Brief Assessment of Higher Education Governance in Ethiopia: Reflection on the Leap of the Decade. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa / Revue de l'enseignement Supérieur En Afrique*, 14(2), 107-126.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2). <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>
- Mohamedbhai, G. (2014). Massification in Higher Education Institutions in Africa: Causes, Consequences and Responses. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v1i1.5644>
- Murtadlo, M., Albana, H., Nisa, Y. F., Izazy, N. Q., Sumiati, N. T., Dewi, M. S., Abdullah, H., & Henry, C. (2025). Inclusive education in Africa: Transforming higher education in low-income countries. *Scientific African*, 28, e02708. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2025.e02708>
- Njifen, I. (2024). Sub-Saharan Africa's higher education: investment decisions on human capital in the presence of youth unemployment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(2), 351-367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2234397>
- Scott, W. R. (2013). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities*. Sage.
- Tamrat, W. (2021). Public-Private Distinction Through the Prism of a Higher Education Law: A Comparison of Policy Postures and Realities. *Higher Education Policy*, 34, 771-788. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-019-00165-x>
- Tamrat, W., & Teferra, D. (2018). Internationalization of Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: Manifestations of a Nascent System. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 22(5), 434-453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318786425>
- Tareke, T. G., Woreta, G. T., Zewude, G. T., Amukune, S., Oo, T. Z., & Józsa, K. (2024). Overview of Ethiopian Public Higher Education: Trends, System, Challenges, and Quality Issues. *Education Sciences*, 14(10). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14101065>
- Terefe Gemechu, D., Ayenew Warota, M., Bouckaert, G., & Kebede Debela, B. (2021). *Public Administration in Ethiopia: Case Studies and Lessons for Sustainable Development*. Leuven: Leuven University Press. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.81991>
- Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8, 45. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-45>
- UNDP. (2015). Capacity development: A UNDP primer. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/CDG_PrimerReport_final_web.pdf

- Yigezu, M. (2021). *Digitalization in teaching and education in Ethiopia Digitalization, the future of work and the teaching profession project*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Yirdaw, A. (2016). Quality of Education in Private Higher Institutions in Ethiopia: The Role of Governance: The Role of Governance. *Sage Open*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015624950>
- Yizengaw, J. Y., & Agegnehu, M. A. (2021). Practices and challenges of school financial resource management implementation in Bahir Dar City administration of Ethiopia: A comparative study between government and private secondary schools. *Cogent Education*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1884340>