**Obstacles to Saudi University Autonomy: A Faculty Perspective**

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Declarations of interest: none

**Abstract**

* Purpose

administrative, financial, and academic Saudi university a facultyperspective and to identify whether views vary based on jtye

* Design/methodology/approach

The study uses the descriptive-analytical approach and a questionnaire.

* Findings

On average, faculty consider administrative constraints on autonomy as the most restrictive, followed by constraints.However, faculty with tens’ consider that financial constraints are greater obstacles to autonomy.

* Originality

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Obstacles, Saudi Universities, University Administration.

The role of universities has undergone significant change in recent decades. In addition to the traditional mission of universities—education, research, and service—new functions have appeared in response to economic, social, and cultural progress. These requirements are complex and intertwined because of higher education’s role in social and economic development and international competitiveness (Michavila and Martinez, 2018). Universities are higher education institutions (HEIs) with open systems that are affected by constant changes in the internal and external environments. Globalization and internationalization have significantly influenced universities’ visions and plans; increasingly, they are autonomous institutions that seek to create knowledge, innovate, and achieve teaching excellence at the national and international levels (Suriansyah *et al.*, 2019).

Recent issues surrounding governance, trust, and interdependence between HEIs and the state are additional challenges that may pose obstacles to progress. In response, some universities have taken steps toward greater institutional autonomy to respond to the changing needs of the economy and society (Nurgaliyeva *et al.,* 2018).

Autonomy is crucial for universities: it enables them to control their activities and grants the freedom to establish their own regulations (Stern, 2018). Universities recognize the importance of a structured approach to autonomy. The components of autonomy mutually influence one another; for example, financial autonomy allows institutions to make decisions regarding employees and wages associated with employee autonomy, i.e., employment and job opportunities. This, in turn, is coupled with attracting highly skilled faculty, which facilitates advanced scientific development and programs (Vorobyova, 2019).

Obstacles to university autonomy include traditional values, outdated academic systems, political and administrative dominance, and the growing corporatist trend of efficiency and competitiveness (Murawska, 2018). These developments challenge HEI autonomy and open up room for interference by the government and other institutions.

The launch of Saudi Vision 2030 led to increasing scientific competition, especially among universities, to provide the best academic services to students and top facilities for scientific research. Thus, universities are seeking autonomy to provide greater academic freedom at the personal, institutional, and professional levels but are thwarted by various constraints, which the current study seeks to identify.

**Research Problem**

University autonomy relates to governance relations between external stakeholders and both universities. University autonomy is an integral dimension, more generally, of bureaucratic autonomy, or the ability to translate preferences into reliable actions without external constraints, and, in the case of HEIs, grants discretion in matters deemed important (Maassen *et al.*, 2017).

Despite the autonomy granted to King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, and Imam Abdulrahman Faisal University, Saudi universities face continuing obstacles to independence. The new system focuses on financial weaning from state support, including academic structures and administrative systems. These three HEIs and others are embarking on developing new identities that will involve establishing creative environments at the academic, financial, administrative, and investment-related levels (Alnaem, 2020).

Universities must give their academic communities more academic, administrative, and financial freedom. In order for universities to guarantee academic freedom, they must have autonomy in their internal affairs without interference from society or the government.

This study poses the following research questions: What are the obstacles to Saudi university autonomy from the faculty point of view? Do the perceived constraints on HEI autonomy vary by job title and years of experience?

There are a number of reasons why studying the autonomy of universities is important:

- Autonomy allows universities to develop policies and manage resources properly, a key element in higher education quality.

- Autonomy includes the right to determine organizational and administrative structures, priorities, budget, staff appointments, and student admissions.

- Academic autonomy is not a privilege, but rather a necessary condition for HEIs to perform their public function of educating and disseminating knowledge.

**Terminology**

*Autonomy*

Autonomy refers to unrestricted decision-making. In a higher education context, the separation of the state from academic institutions improves HEI performance (Agasisti and Shibanova, 2020). Autonomous HEIs freely decide on their internal organization through executive leadership, decision-making bodies, legal entities, and administrative and financial structures, without external interference.

*Administrative Independence*

Administrative independence is the ability of public institutions to determine their preferences and translate them into actions, in particular, in their relationship with external actors, i.e., elected officials and politicians (Bach, 2016). Administrative independence gives HEIs the ability to choose their administrative structures and procedures, develop strategic plans and establish regulations.

*Financial Stability*

Financial independence is the university’s freedom to oversee its financial affairs in pursuit of its strategic objectives (EUA, 2021). Financially independent universities establish their own financial rules and regulations and manage their funds independently in alignment with strategic objectives.

*Academic Independence*

Academic independence is the ability to decide on academic issues, including student admissions, academic content, quality assurance, degree programs, and language of instruction (EUA, 2021). It gives HEIs the ability to conduct comprehensive academic planning on the development of new schools, structuring academic disciplines and programs, and ensuring student freedom of expression.

*Obstacles to Autonomy*

Obstacles to autonomy are internal and external processes that restrict the university’s ability to achieve administrative, academic, or financial independence.

**Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The literature on university autonomy has two main strands: 1) the legal and regulatory tools and practices between the state and HEIs and the related power trade-offs; and 2) the characteristics of higher education governance systems embedded in their social and cultural context.

An important recent development in the first body of literature was the “self-scorecard” by Estermann *et al*. (2011), which measures and compares the autonomy of European HEIs in four areas—organizational, financial, staffing, and academic—using 24 indicators that measure the relative authority of HEIs vis-à-vis the state to make regulatory decisions and be autonomous.

The second category of literature classifies university autonomy by procedural or substantive autonomy, which is the extent to which the university exercises authority over its administration or is required to meet the state’s administrative and reporting requirements. This approach assumes a continuum of authority, with state authority and university independence at opposite poles and that authority between the government and HEIs is a zero-sum game (St. George, 2019).

A study by the Asian Development Bank (2012) found a trade-off between institutional independence and state power. The study posited that independence entails the freedom that HEIs receive from the government and those freedoms the government wishes to grant. This was also highlighted by Salmi (2007) in a paper on independence from the state versus responding to market demands; he concluded that HEIs that escape state control are better able to control their own destinies and benefit from market forces. Studies on the benefits of autonomy for HEI outcomes rely heavily on Aghion *et al.* (2010), which found that, all else equal, U.S. HEIs with greater autonomy and competitiveness generated more output in terms of patents and publications. The premise of these studies is that HEIs and the state are separate and competing entities, and there are benefits to reducing state interference in higher education (St. George, 2019).

Autonomy has two important components: policy and management. Policy autonomy is independent discretion in policy implementation, while management autonomy is the delegation of management functions to facilitate independent decision-making and enable effective behavior (Waluyo, 2018). Any restrictions on the independence of HEIs must be based on educational or legal grounds, such as accreditation requirements or nondiscrimination laws, not on political grounds (Karran, 2020).

University management comprises four styles: 1) self-organization within a framework of social accountability featured in the U.S., Canada, the UK, Australia, the Netherlands, and New Zealand; 2) the transition to self-regulation featured in Finland, Sweden, Singapore, the Philippines, and Nigeria; 3) organizations facing difficulties, including Eastern European and Latin American countries; and 4) sharp centralization and full government regulation, including France, Italy, and Germany in Europe; China and India in Asia; and some African and Arab countries (Al Khatib, 2015).

The Saudi higher education system relies on the government for most of its funding and infrastructure. Recently, however, Saudi Arabia’s business sector has contributed significant money and resources to support research in public universities, including full funding for major *waqf* projects and the appointment of research chairs. Because universities now must generate a significant portion of their research funding, there are increasing demands by the universities to make their own decisions regarding funding allocations. To this end, university governance mechanisms must be modified and universities given the opportunity to achieve autonomy (Al-Eisa and Smith, 2013).

King Abdulaziz University was established as the first private HEI in Saudi Arabia in 1967, although it was subsequently converted into a government institution. The true beginning of private higher education was in 1999 with the establishment of Prince Sultan University, followed by eight private universities and 18 private colleges (Al-Eisa and Smith, 2013). The introduction of private universities was a driving force for reform in Saudi higher education, as they required autonomy or at least shared governance, even though private HEIs have still not achieved autonomy

In Saudi Arabia, public universities are fully funded and operated by the government, according to the ten-year National Development Plan; thus, the government exercises significant control over these universities. Students pay no tuition fees, which has also given rise to a culture of entitlement.

There are two recent major higher education reforms in Saudi Arabia: the establishment of universities independent of the Ministry of Higher Education and amendments to the new university system. Despite this, the transformation of academic and administrative structures has been slow, as university staff remains the same as before the reform. Respecting employee rights has become an impediment to the new system and to projecting a new identity of independent universities. It creates obstacles and challenges, as the concept of “change” at the core of the drive for independence has come under serious investigation (Alnaem, 2020). There are still many obstacles that prevent Saudi universities from achieving autonomy; this affects the management of universities, and, ultimately, the academic process.

Agasisti and Shibanova (2020) examined the relationship between the institutional autonomy of universities (formal and informal) and their performance and efficiency, using the methodology of multiple experimental stages. The researchers first measured the “independence in action” index, then analyzed the data to assess institutional efficiency. Finally, they used a steady impact regression and an effective variable approach to provide strong evidence of the relationship between institutional autonomy, performance, and efficiency. The study showed that formal autonomy does not directly affect university performance efficiency. The results also revealed that informal autonomy is positively correlated with degrees of competence. Moreover, advanced practices of autonomy in personnel management can contribute to increased publishing activity and overall institutional efficiency.

St. George (2019) analyzed the relationship between autonomy and quality in universities in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, which relies heavily on the bi-branched neoliberal framework of higher education. The study showed that efforts to achieve autonomy to improve quality should be more precise, taking into account the internal dynamics of a unified state structure, the possibilities arising from regional participation, and the lessons learned from neighboring countries on a similar path.

The study by Aithal and Aithal (2019) analyzed the challenges and opportunities that universities face and how these challenges can be addressed through autonomy to achieve excellence. It examined general strategies used by universities, especially autonomy, based on a review of the performance of private universities and their position in the rankings. The study also discussed the nature of independence and its implementation in universities for academic, research, and technological innovations, as well as for cooperation and expansion. It showed that the autonomy of universities contributes to quality improvements of educational services, finances, and scientific research capacities.

Shabani *et al*. (2019) sought to determine the scope of autonomy in pursuit of transformation and innovation at Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, using the mixed exploratory approach. The research strategies included a descriptive survey of ten faculty who were selected by target sampling. The study also involved 434 other faculty members, 204 of whom were selected using stratified random sampling.

The data were collected using a questionnaire containing 75 questions. The results showed that academic independence has two dimensions: structural (i.e., organizational, financial, policy-making, and national/regional); and content (i.e., academic/educational, scientific, and technological). The results also stressed the need to support autonomy in universities because of its role in maintaining scientific quality.

Ayan (2018) discussed administrative processes in employment and independence in higher education institutions in Turkey. The researcher used a narrative-descriptive approach, reviewing the history and evolution of the educational process from the late Ottoman Empire to today. The results showed that Turkish universities did not have autonomy in the appointment of faculty, student enrollment, or administrative decision-making, despite some improvements in the 1960s. Many new universities have been established, but faculty recruitment processes have not been transparent, and university infrastructure has not been considered. The study found that, because of the limited autonomy of university departments, these universities did not meet the needs of either faculty or prospective students. Decisions regarding recruitment and enrollment were managed solely by the Higher Education Council, in accordance with governmental decisions.

A study by Maassen *et al.* (2017) examined recent university reforms aimed at supporting the independence of universities. It highlighted the various tensions in fundamental reform ideologies, focusing on the traditional interpretation of university independence in reform logics. The study also provided an analytical framework for studying how autonomy is interpreted and used within universities, showing that universities need to go beyond formal arrangements and analyze practices that help achieve full autonomy.

**Methodology**

This study uses the descriptive-analytical approach, which describes the reality of the object of study, analyzes the results, and reaches conclusions.

The universe of the present study consists of all 3,365 faculty members at Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Bisha University, and Hafr Al Batin University.

The sample was collected via a simple random sample method, with a total of 336 faculty members in the second semester of the 2021 academic year. Key variables of the sample are presented in the following tables.

**Table I**

Table I shows that 268 of the study sample participants, representing 79.8%, are faculty members; 34 have the title Vice Dean, representing 10.1% of the sample; 21 have the job title Department Head, representing 6.3%; and 13 of them, at 3.9% of the sample, are Deans.

**Table II**

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Table II shows that 38.1% of the study sample members have 5–10 years of experience, 38.1% have more than 10 years of experience, and 23.8% have less than 5 years of experience.

*Study Tool*

The researcher used a survey as a tool for collecting data, which was designed considering the relevant literature and based on the study’s objectives. The final version had three parts: 1) an introduction to the study objectives and type of data to be collected, with a guarantee of confidentiality to the participants; 2) preliminary data about job title and years of experience of the research participants; and 3) 41 statements, distributed on one basic axis and three fields.

Table III shows the number and distribution of the survey statements.

**Table III**

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The Likert pentatonic scale was used to obtain the responses of the participants (see Table IV).

**Table IV**

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*Study Tool Validity*

 was used to confirm the study tool’s validity.

A preliminary version of the questionnaire was presented to six qualified arbitrators. They assessed the quality of the questionnaire and its suitability for the objectives. Based on their feedback, the necessary amendments were made, and the final version was produced.

Internal consistency was assessed using Pearson’s correlation coefficient, which was calculated to determine the degree of correlation between each survey statement and the axis.

**Table V**

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Table V shows that the values of the coefficient of correlation of each statement to its axis are positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level and below, indicating internal consistency between the statements and their appropriateness to conduct measurements.

*Study Tool Reliability*

The reliability of the study tool was confirmed through the use of Cronbach’s alpha. Table VI shows the values of the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for each axis of the survey.

**Table VI**

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Tables III–VI show that the general reliability coefficient is high, reaching 0.972.

After confirming the validity, reliability, and applicability of the survey, 336 surveys were distributed electronically. To achieve the study objectives and analyze the collected data, several statistical methods were employed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The following statistical measures were then calculated: weighted mean, mean, standard deviation, one-way ANOVA, and the Scheffe test.

**Results**

To answer the main research question about the obstacles to Saudi university autonomy, the average of each axis was calculated.

**Table VII**

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Table VII shows that the study participants strongly agreed with the impediments to Saudi university autonomy on average (3.51 out of 5), indicating that the most significant obstacles were administrative (3.58), followed by academic (3.53), and financial (3.43). The faculty identified administrative independence as a fundamental pillar of autonomy.

The current study affirms the findings of Ayan (2018) that universities do not have autonomy regarding student enrollment, faculty recruitment, or administrative decisions, despite positive improvements in the 1960s. Although many new universities were established in Saudi Arabia, the recruitment process of faculty was not transparent, limiting the autonomy of university departments. The current study also agrees with Maassen *et al*. (2017), which found that universities must go beyond formal arrangements to include practices that help achieve full autonomy.

Regarding the subquestions about , the averages and standard deviations of the responses are presented in Table VIII.

**Table VIII**

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Table VIII shows that the participants strongly agree regarding administrative impediments to autonomy in Saudi universities, with an average of 3.58 out of 5.00. The most prominent administrative impediments are found in statements 9 (4.12), 7 (3.82), and 6 (3.80), suggesting that ies overseenthat follows government

The three lowest-ranking statements regarded restricting university authority refer to determining a university’s identity (research/teaching/technical(, establishing partnerships with the local community, and appointing faculty. Limiting a university’s authority to determine its own identity is related to issues of university diversity in the region where the university is located, as well as the government being entitled to make decisions because it provides full funding.

In answer to the second subquestions on financial constraints, the averages and standard deviations of the responses are presented in Table IX below.

**Table IX**

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Table IX shows that the participants agree significantly, regarding the constraints on financial autonomy, with an average of 3.43 out of 5.00.The most prominent financial constraints are found in statements 10 (3.77), 2 (3.61), and 13 (3.56).

Faculty members are aware of the importance of university financial independence. Universities receive generous funding from the government, which impacts university administration. It is the gateway to interference in university affairs and decision-making. As a result, it is necessary to grant limited licenses. The government should provide supervision and require accountability.

The results of the current study are consistent with the findings of Aithal and Aithal (2019). Financial independence is a challenge for public universities, while private universities have better chances of improving their financial position and potential for innovation, excellence, and academic quality. Agasisti and Shibanova (2020) also noted the heterogeneity of the criteria by which universities are selected. This grants financial autonomy privileges as envisaged by the Board of Directors. In this way, the key element of informal autonomy is not associated with higher performance or efficiency. Such a link may arise from two points: whether universities are formally independent or not and whether they are accountable for how resources acquired from the private sector are redistributed.

In response to the third subquestions about academic obstacles, the averages and standard deviations of the responses were calculated, with the results presented in Table X.

**Table X**

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Table X shows that the research participants strongly agree that there are academic constraints on Saudi university autonomy, with an average of 3.53 out of 5.00.

The most prominent academic obstacles are found in statements 3 (4.00), 1 (3.80), and 4 (3.77), all indicating the obstacles to academic independence that prevent achieving academic goals. The results concur with St. George (2019), that efforts to achieve academic autonomy to improve higher education quality should be more precise, taking into account the internal dynamics of the state.

In response to the fourth subquestions regarding whether constraints vary by job title or years of experience, Tables XI and XII present relevant data.

The one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the significance of differences in the responses according to both job title and years of experience variables.

**Table XI**

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Table XI shows no statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level and below in the views of the study participants based on position in the university.

**Table XII**

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Table XII shows that there are no statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level of significance and below in the views of the study participants on administrative and academic constraints based on years of experience. However, there are statistically significant differences at the 0.01 level and below on impediments to financial independence based on years of experience.

To determine the differences between the categories in the years of experience variable, the Scheffe test was used. Table XIII shows0.01 and below participants who had less with’ experiencebarriers to , those with ’ experience. This is attributed faculty with ’ experience are more familiar less-experienced faculty

**Table XIII**

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**Recommendations**

In view of these findings, the following recommendations are made :

\* Amend the university system and its regulations by the Ministry of Education and relevant bodies to support self-regulation and social accountability to enhance autonomy.

\* Delegate university decision-making.

\* Appoint university leaders through free elections.

\* Issue instructions to university leaders to limit centralization and delegate authority.

\* Reduce the high fees of graduate programs; Develop rules for regulating and determining program fees.

\* Increase university powers to benefit from the annual budget surplus allocated by the state.

\* Grant universities freedom to invest in buildings and resources to achieve investment partnerships, including unrestricted signing of contracts with companies.

\* Work on establishing associations involving faculty interests.

\* Work to increase the financial resources allocated to expand graduate programs.

\* Advocate for transparency and clarity in university performance reports and grant access to the reports by the relevant parties.

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