**The Obstacles to Autonomy of Saudi Universities from the Perspective of Faculty Members**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to identify the obstacles to autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty members. First the study focuses on administrative, financial, and academic constraints. Then it reveals the statistically significant differences in the obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities, which are attributable to the variables of the study: Job Title and Number of Years of Experience. To achieve its objectives, the study uses the descriptive analytical approach and a questionnaire on a sample of total 336 faculty members. The results show that administrative independence constraints place first, followed by the constraints of academic independence, and finally the constraints of financial independence. In addition, there are statistically significant differences regarding constraints of financial independence, in terms of the study variables Job Title and Years of Experience, between those with less than 5 years of experience, and those with more than 10 years of experience. The differences are in the interest of the group whose experience exceeds 10 years. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommends amending the university system and regulations to grant autonomy to Saudi universities, stressing the importance of making and taking joint decisions away from centralization, and appointing the leaders of Saudi universities through free election.

**Key Words:** Autonomy, Obstacles, Saudi Universities, University Administration.

Universities have witnessed a significant change in their role during the past decades. In addition to the traditional functions of universities—education, research and community service, new posts appeared. Modern requirements emerged as responses to economic, social, and cultural progress. These requirements are complex and intertwined because of the role that higher education plays in social and economic development and international competitiveness (Michavila & Martinez, 2018). The university can be considered, in terms of organization, an institution with an open system that is constantly affected by change in its external and internal operations. Trends of globalization and internationalization significantly influence this change, affecting most of the plans and visions of universities, making them behave as autonomous institutional entities that seek to create knowledge, innovation, quality, and excellence in teaching at the national and international levels (Suriansyah et al., 2019).

In recent years, issues of governance, trust, and interdependence between higher education and the state have become additional challenges that, if maintained, may constitute an obstacle to progress. Some universities have taken practical steps toward greater institutional autonomy. This autonomy is necessary for higher education to be completely ready to respond to the changing requirements of the economy and society (Nurgaliyeva et al., 2018).

Autonomy is important and beneficial for universities. It enables them to control their activities and independence; and it grants them freedom in making their own laws (Stern, 2018). Universities have recognized the importance of adopting a structured approach to developing and applying the concept of autonomy in universities. There are correlations between the components of autonomy and mutual influence, especially since a high level of financial autonomy allows the institution to make decisions on the number of employees and the level of wages that is associated with the level of autonomy of employees, i.e. employment and job opportunities. This is coupled with hiring highly skilled faculty, which makes possible the achievement of scientific development and progress required to provide advanced scientific services (Vorobyova, 2019).

There are many obstacles hindering the achievement of autonomy in universities, including traditional values, the outdated foundations of academic culture; the supremacy of administrative or political bureaucracy; and the corporate and business cultures which have recently spread, along with the spread of cultures based on ideas of efficiency, competitiveness, financial freedom, measurability, employment, mobility, and globalization (Murawska, 2018). These and other challenges have become obstacles to universities’ access to autonomy and have opened up more room for the state, as well as some institutions, to interfere in the work of universities.

Given the developments in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, especially after the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, there is clearly increasing competition between scientific forums, especially universities. They compete with one another to provide the best academic services for students, while achieving the highest progress in scientific research through its intellectual and practical activities. As a part of this development, many universities are trying to achieve autonomy, but there are various administrative, financial, and academic constraints that limit their ability to do so. Saudi universities seek to achieve autonomy to provide greater freedom for their academic staff to work and progress at the personal, institutional, and professional levels, but the efforts of Saudi universities in this regard face a number of obstacles, which the current study seeks to identify.

**Research Problem**

University autonomy is a concept used to describe and study governance relations between state authorities and the University, both at the level of a sector of universities, and at the level of an individual institution. Academic interest in university autonomy is an integral part of interest in areas of public policy and public administration within bureaucratic autonomy generally. Bureaucratic autonomy can be defined as the ability to translate an individual’s preferences into reliable actions without external constraints. The issue of autonomy addresses the discretion of the university in matters it deems important (Maassen et al., 2017).

Saudi universities face obstacles to achieving autonomy even with the decision to grant autonomy to three universities: King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, and Imam Abdulrahman Faisal University. The new system focuses on financial weaning or semi-weaning from dependence on state support. The decision to go autonomous includes the academic structure and administrative system. This means embarking on the formation of a new identity for these three Saudi universities over the next few years, as well as other universities to be included in the decision in the future. This identity determines the existence of a creative environment at the academic, financial, administrative, and investment-related levels (Alnaem, 2020).

Universities must invest their available human capacity to give the academic community more academic, administrative, and financial freedom, keeping pace with these changes and constraints. In order for universities to provide their academic communities sufficient freedom, autonomy must be achieved in the management of their internal affairs without interference from society or the government.

This study aims to identify the constraints to autonomy in Saudi universities from the perspective of faculty members in three categories: administrative, financial, and academic. The research problem is as follows: What are the obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of the faculty?

**Study Questions**

The main question stated above branches out into several considerations, as follows:

1. What are the administrative obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty members?

2. What are the financial constraints to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty members?

3. What are the academic constraints to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty members?

4. Are there statistically significant differences in the autonomy constraints of Saudi universities, due to the study variables Job Title and Number of Years of Experience?

**Study Objectives**

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identify the administrative obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty members.

2. Identify the financial obstacles to autonomy of universities in Saudi Arabia from the point of view of faculty members.

3. Study the academic constraints of autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty members.

4. Detect the statistically significant differences to the constraints of autonomy of Saudi universities, which are attributed to the study variables Job Title and Number of Years of Experience.

**Importance of Study**

The importance of studying the autonomy of universities is shown below:

- Autonomy allows the university to develop its policies and manage its resources properly; this is a key element in quality in higher education.

- The principle of autonomy includes the right of universities to determine their organizational and administrative structures, decide on priorities, manage the budget, appoint staff, admit students, etc.

- Academic autonomy is not a privilege. It is a necessary condition for higher education institutions, in order to be able to perform their public function of educating and disseminating knowledge.

- This study helps to identify obstacles to the autonomy of universities, discussing them in the context of Saudi universities.

- This study supports Saudi universities in their efforts toward autonomy, identifying the most important obstacles.

**Study Terms**

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is defined as the level of freedom of decision-making without restrictions by managers, authorities, and organizations of a higher level. The separation of the top departments of the state from academic and public institutions can improve the performance of these institutions (Agasisti & Shibanova, 2020). The researcher defines autonomy as the capacity of the university to freely decide on its internal organization through executive leadership, decision-making bodies, legal entities, and the administrative and financial structures without the interference of external actors.

**Administrative Independence**

Administrative independence refers to the ability of public institutions to determine their preferences and translate those preferences into reliable actions. The concept describes the relationship between an organization and a group of actors outside the organization, most notably elected officials and executive politicians (Bach, 2016). The researcher defines administrative independence as the ability of the university to choose its administrative structure and administrative procedures and draw up its appropriate strategic plans to achieve its goals and establish regulations without being influenced by the dictates of external parties.

**Financial Stability**

Financial independence refers to the university’s ability to freely decide on its internal financial affairs, and its financial capacity, enabling the university to define and achieve its strategic objectives independently (European University Association, 2021). The researcher defines financial independence as the ability of the university to set its own financial rules and regulations, and to manage its funds independently, without external interventions within the budget set for it in order to achieve its strategic objectives.

**Academic Independence**

Academic independence refers to the university’s ability to make decisions on various academic issues such as student admission, academic content, quality assurance, and the delivery of degree programs and language of instruction (European University Association, 2021). The researcher defines academic independence as the actual ability of the university to carry out academic planning in relation to all aspects of the educational process, including the development of new faculties, structuring academic disciplines and programs, and ensuring that the students enrolled enjoy full freedom to express their opinions and defend their interests.

**Obstacles to Autonomy**

The researcher defines the obstacles of autonomy as internal and external processes and procedures which negatively affect the university’s ability to achieve autonomy, whether administrative, academic, or financial.

**Scope of the Study**

**Participants**: Limited to faculty members in Saudi universities.

**Spatial** **Scope**: Saudi universities, namely: Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Bisha University, and Hafr Al Batin University.

**Temporal** **Scope**: The study was carried out in the second semester of the academic year 2021.

**Objectives**: The study was limited to the constraints of autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty members.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Autonomy in Higher Education Institutions**

The available literature on autonomy in universities can be divided into two main categories. The first focuses on the legal and regulatory tools and practices that define the relationship between the state and higher education institutions and the trade-offs in power between the two. The second category of relevant literature tends to focus less on the trade-offs between institutions of higher education and the state, and more on the characteristics of higher education governance systems embedded in their social and cultural context.

One of the most important recent developments in the first type of literature was the “self-scorecard” project by Thomas Estermann et al. (2011) under the auspices of the European University Association. The self-scorecard is an attempt to measure and compare how much autonomy higher education institutions have across European countries. The scorecard identifies four areas of independence—organizational, financial, staffing and academic—and provides 24 indicators. These indicators measure the extent to which institutions of higher education have greater authority than the state to make regulatory decisions, and to obtain higher degrees of autonomy.

Within the second category of literature, some authors classify university autonomy according to the extent to which the university exercises “procedural autonomy” or “substantive autonomy.” “Procedural autonomy” refers to the extent to which the university exercises its authority over its administration or is required to meet administrative and reporting requirements imposed by the state. These approaches are based on the concept that autonomy is based on a continuum, with state authority on the one hand and university independence on the other. This category assumes a zero-sum game between the state and higher education institutions, where the loss of one is a gain for the other (St George, 2019).

In a study by the Asian Development Bank (2012) on governance and independence in Asia, the trade-off between institutional independence and state power was noted. The study explained that independence is not only about the question of what freedoms higher education institutions will receive from the government, but also about what freedoms the government wishes to grant. This understanding was also highlighted by Jamil al-Salmi (2007), the World Bank’s former Tertiary Education Coordinator, in one of his papers on independence from the state versus responding to market demands, where he concluded that if a higher education institution was able to escape the negative control of the state, it would be better able to control its own destiny and benefit from responding to market demands. The work of Salmi and other advocates of the benefits of autonomy to improve the outcomes of higher education institutions relies heavily on a study by Philip Aghion et al. (2010), which found that with all other factors being equal, U.S. higher education institutions with higher levels of autonomy and higher levels of competition will generate higher levels of output in terms of patents and publications, when they have a bigger budget. This group of authors begins from the premise that higher educational institutions and the state are in fact separate and competing entities, with frequent emphasis on the benefits of reducing state interference in higher education (St George, 2019).

Autonomy has two important components: policy and management. Policy autonomy refers to 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 an institution must be based on basic educational or legal needs, such as accreditation requirements or non-discrimination laws, and not on political grounds (Karran, 2020).

University management is classified into four management styles:

The first mode: self-organization within the framework of social accountability, featured in the USA, Canada, England, Australia, the Netherlands, and New Zealand.

The second mode: the transition to self-regulation, featured in Finland, Sweden, Singapore, the Philippines and Nigeria.

The third mode: organization facing difficulties, including Eastern European and Latin American countries.

The fourth mode: sharp centralization and full regulation of universities by governments, including some European countries, such as France, Italy; and Germany; some Asian countries, such as China and India; and some African and Arab countries (AlKhatib, 2015).

The Saudi higher education system relies on the government for most of its funding and infrastructure. However, in recent years, Saudi Arabia’s private business sector has contributed significant amounts of money and resources to support research capacities in public universities, including full funding for major *waqf* projects and the appointment of research chairs in a variety of disciplines and universities. Because universities now generate a significant portion of their research funding, there is an increasing pressure from the universities on the government for the right to make their own decisions regarding the allocation of this funding. To achieve this result, the mechanism of governance of universities must be modified and universities must be given the opportunity to achieve autonomy (Al-Eisa & Smith, 2013).

As early as 1967, King Abdulaziz University was established as the first privately owned higher education institution in Saudi Arabia (although shortly after in 1974, it was converted by decision of the Cabinet into a government institution). Establishing Prince Sultan University in 1999 was the real beginning of the private higher education in Saudi Arabia, and throughout the following decade, eight private universities and eighteen private college were launched, but these universities still have not achieved autonomy (Al-Eisa & Smith, 2013). The researcher believes that the introduction of private universities was a driving force for reform, as it required autonomy or at least shared governance.

Although the level of government involvement in the operation of higher education systems and institutions varies across countries and is often proportionate to its funding, in Saudi Arabia, public universities are fully operated and funded by the government. Students pay no tuition fees. A culture of entitlement thus arose, as a result of the lucrative government funding of higher education as a central pillar of the ten-year National Development Plan. Consequently, and because of its strong financial support, the government exercised strong control over universities.

There are two major recent reforms in higher education in Saudi Arabia: the establishment of a university independent of the Ministry of Higher Education and amendments to the new university system. Despite this, the transformation in the academic and administrative structures is a slow process because the university staff remains the same as before this independence. Adhering to the rights of the employees becomes an inevitable professional impediment to the new decision. This prevents the ability to project a new identity of independent universities. It creates obstacles and challenges, as the concept of “change,” which is at the core of the independence of universities, comes under serious investigation (Alnaem, 2020). There are still many obstacles that prevent Saudi universities from achieving autonomy. This is a major factor influencing the management of universities, which ultimately affects the academic process, thereby creating administrative, financial, and academic constraints.

**Literature Review**

Agasisti and Shibanova (2020) aimed to examine the relationship between institutional autonomy of universities (formal and informal) and its performance and efficiency, using the methodology of multiple experimental stages. To achieve the objective of the study, the researchers first measured the “independence in action” index. Then they analyzed the data to assess institutional efficiency. Finally, the researchers used a steady impact regression and an effective variable approach to provide strong evidence of the relationship between institutional autonomy, performance, and efficiency. The results of the study showed that formal autonomy does not directly affect efficiency in university performance. 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) discussed 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 reach autonomy to improve quality in higher education should be more precise, taking into account the internal dynamics of a unified state structure, the possibilities arising from regional participation, and the lessons that can be learned from neighboring countries on a similar path.

The objective of the study by Aithal and Aithal (2019) was to analyze the challenges and opportunities that universities face and how these challenges can be addressed through autonomy to achieve excellence. Using the analytical approach, the study examined general strategies used by universities and their suitability for the higher education system, especially autonomy, based on a review of the performance of private universities and their ranking among universities. 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 improvement of the quality of educational services provided, as well as improving the university’s financial situation and scientific research capacities.

Shabani et al. (2019) aimed to determine the scope of university autonomy, in pursuit of transformation and innovation at Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences. To achieve this, the researcher used the mixed exploratory approach. The research strategies included a descriptive survey of the faculty of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences. The ten faculty in the descriptive survey were selected by the target sampling method, on the basis of theoretical saturation. The study also involved 434 other faculty members, 204 of which were selected using the stratified random sampling method.

The data were collected using a questionnaire prepared by the researcher containing 75 questions. The results showed that academic independence has two dimensions: structure and content. The structural dimension consists of four components of independence: organizational, financial, policy-making, and national/regional. The content dimension includes three components of independence: 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 by depicting all processes from the late Ottoman Empire to current changes. The results of the study showed that Turkish universities did not have autonomy in the appointment of faculty, enrollment of students, or making administrative decisions within their administrative bodies, despite some positive improvements in the 1960s. Many new universities have been established, but faculty recruitment processes have not been transparently managed and university infrastructure has not been widely taken into account. The study explained that these universities did not respond to the needs of both faculty members and prospective students who want to get a university education, because of the limited autonomy of university departments. 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 the logic of reform. The study also provided an analytical framework for studying how autonomy is interpreted and used within universities. It showed that in order to understand the implications of autonomy, universities need to go beyond the scrutiny of formal arrangements, analyzing autonomy practices that help to achieve full autonomy at universities.

**Study Methodology and Procedures**

**Methodology**

This study uses the descriptive-analytical approach, which is one of the most suitable approaches to the subject because it relies on describing the reality of the phenomenon, analyzing the results, and building conclusions in light of the current context.

**Participants**

The community of the present study consists of all 3,365 faculty members at Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Bisha University, and Hafr Al Batin University, according to the website of each university.

**Study Sample**

The sample was collected via a simple random sample method, with a total of 336 faculty members.

**Characteristics of the Study Sample Participants**

A number of key variables were set to describe the study sample participants, including Job Title and Number of Years of Experience, as detailed below:

1) Job Title:

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Study Sample ParticipantsAaccording to the Job Title Variable*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Job Title** | **Repetition** | **Percentage %** |
| Dean | 13 | 3.9 |
| Vice Dean | 34 | 10.1 |
| Head of Department | 21 | 6.3 |
| Faculty member | 268 | 79.8 |
| **Total** | **336** | **100%** |

Table 1 shows that (268) of the study sample, representing a rate of 79.8%, has the job title “Faculty Member;” (34) of them representing, approximately 10.1% of the total members of the study sample, have the job title “Vice Dean;” (21) of them, representing approximately 6.3% of the total members of the study sample, have the job title “Head of the Department;” and (13) of them, representing approximately 3.9% of the total members of the study sample, have the job title “Dean.”

2) Number of Years of Experience:

**Table 2**

*Distribution of Study Sample According to the Variable Number of Years of Experience*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Number of Years of Experience** | **Repetition** | **Percentage %** |
| Less than 5 years | 80 | 23.8 |
| From 5 years to 10 years | 128 | 38.1 |
| More than 10 years | 128 | 38.1 |
| **Total** | **336** | **100%** |

Table 2 shows that (128) of the study sample members, representing 38.1%, have from 5 years to 10 years of experience; (128) of them, representing 38.1% of the total study sample members, have more than 10 years of experience; and (80) of them, representing 23.8% of the total study sample members, have less than 5 years of experience.

**Study Tool**

The researcher used a survey as a tool for collecting data and information.

***Building the Study Tool***

After reviewing the literature and previous studies related to the subject of the current study, and in light of the data and questions of the study and its objectives, the tool (survey) was built. Its final form consisted of three parts:

1. The first section contained an introduction to the objectives of the study and type of data the researcher sought to collect from the study sample, with a guarantee of the confidentiality of the information provided.

2. The second section contained the preliminary data of the members of the study sample: Job Title and Number of Years of Experience.

3. The third section consisted of (41) phrases, distributed on one basic axis and three fields. Table 3 shows the number and distribution of the phrases of the survey.

**Table 3**

*Survey Axes and Phrases*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Axis** | **Field** | **Number of Phrases** | **Total** |
| Obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities | Area I: Administrative barriers to independence | 14 | 41 |
| Area 2: Impediments to financial independence | 13 |
| Area 3: Barriers to academic independence | 14 |
| **Survey** | **41 phrases** |

The Likert pentatonic scale was used to obtain the responses of the study sample members.

**Table 4**

*The Likert Pentatonic Scale Division (Limits of Response Averages)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Category | Category Boundaries |
| From | To |
| 1 | Very Strong | 4.21 | 5.00 |
| 2 | Strong | 3.41 | 4.20 |
| 3 | Medium | 2.61 | 3.40 |
| 4 | Weak | 1.81 | 2.60 |
| 5 | I don’t agree | 1.00 | 1.80 |

***Study Tool Validity***

The researcher confirmed the validity of the study tool through:

**1. Face validity (veracity of arbitrators):**

The questionnaire was presented, as a preliminary form, to (6) arbitrators competent in the subject of the study. They assessed the quality of the questionnaire and its suitability for the objectives of the study. Upon receiving feedback, the necessary amendments suggested by the majority of the arbitrators were made and the survey came out in its final format.

**2. Study tool internal consistency:**

Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the degree of correlation between each survey phrase and the axis.

**Table 5**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients for the Survey Phrases with the Total Degree of the Axis*

| (Obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities( |
| --- |
| Axis | Number of phrase | Axis correlation coefficient | Number of phrases | Axis correlation coefficient |
| Area 1:Administrative barriers to independence | 1 | 0.717\*\* | 8 | 0.348\*\* |
| 2 | 0.776\*\* | 9 | 0.732\*\* |
| 3 | 0.737\*\* | 10 | 0.523\*\* |
| 4 | 0.705\*\* | 11 | 0.794\*\* |
| 5 | 0.839\*\* | 12 | 0.756\*\* |
| 6 | 0.854\*\* | 13 | 0.409\*\* |
| 7 | 0.688\*\* | 14 | 0.725\*\* |
| Area 2: Impediments to financial independence | 1 | 0.765\*\* | 8 | 0.777\*\* |
| 2 | 0.663\*\* | 9 | 0.683\*\* |
| 3 | 0.800\*\* | 10 | 0.601\*\* |
| 4 | 0.862\*\* | 11 | 0.738\*\* |
| 5 | 0.844\*\* | 12 | 0.796\*\* |
| 6 | 0.824\*\* | 13 | 0.818\*\* |
| 7 | 0.687\*\* | - | - |
| Area 3:Barriers to academic independence | 1 | 0.745\*\* | 8 | 0.732\*\* |
| 2 | 0.813\*\* | 9 | 0.652\*\* |
| 3 | 0.782\*\* | 10 | 0.837\*\* |
| 4 | 0.737\*\* | 11 | 0.820\*\* |
| 5 | 0.842\*\* | 12 | 0.815\*\* |
| 6 | 0.720\*\* | 13 | 0.823\*\* |
| 7 | 0.597\*\* | 14 | 0.748\*\* |

The denominator is at 0.01 and lower.

Table 5 shows that the values of the coefficient of correlation of each phrase to its axis are positive and statistically significant at (0.01) and lower, indicating the internal consistency between the phrases and their appropriateness to measure what they were set to measure.

***Reliability of Study Tool***

The reliability of the study tool was confirmed through the use of alpha-Cronbach (Cronbach’s Alpha (α) equation). Table 6 shows the values of the alpha-Cronbach coefficients for each axis of the survey.

**Table 6**

*Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient to Measure the Reliability of the Study Tool*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Survey | Axis | Number of Phrases | Axis Reliability |
| Obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities | Area 1:Administrative barriers to independence | 14 | 0.911 |
| Area 2:Impediments to financial independence | 13 | 0.938 |
| Area 3:Barriers to academic independence | 14 | 0.943 |
| General constancy | 41 | 0.972 |

Tables 3-6 show that the general reliability coefficient is high, reaching (0.972).

***Study Application Procedures***

After confirming the validity, reliability, and applicability of the survey, the researcher started the practical application and distributed (336) surveys electronically.

***Statistical Processing Methods***

To achieve the objectives of the study, and to analyze the collected data, several appropriate statistical methods were employed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The following statistical measures were then calculated:

Weighted Mean, Mean, Standard Deviation, one Way ANOVA, and the Scheffe test.

**Analysis and Interpretation of the Results of the Study**

Answer to the main question: What are the obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of the faculty?

To determine the constraints of autonomy for Saudi universities, the average of this axis was calculated. Table 7 shows the general results of this axis.

**Table 7**

*Responses of Sample Members to the Constraints of Autonomy of Saudi Universities*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  Axis | Average | Standard Deviation | Level |
| 1 | Area 1:Administrative barriers to independence | 3.58 | 0.845 | 1 |
| 2 | Area 2:Impediments to financial independence | 3.43 | 0.958 | 3 |
| 3 | Area 3:Barriers to academic independence | 3.53 | 0.999 | 2 |
| Obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities | 3.51 | 0.875 | **-** |

The results shown above indicate that the study sample members strongly agreed with the impediments to autonomy of Saudi universities on average (3.51 out of 5). The results show that the most significant impediments to autonomy of Saudi universities were in the administrative field, with an average of (3.58 out of 5); followed by the academic field, with an average of (3.53 out of 5); and financial field, with an average of (3.43 out of 5). The researcher attributes the placing of the field of administrative independence impediments in first place to the awareness of faculty members of the importance of administrative independence. It is the fundamental pillar of autonomy.

The current study agrees with the findings of Ayan’s (2018) study that universities did not actually have autonomy regarding the enrollment of students, recruiting of faculty, and making of administrative decisions within their own administrative bodies, despite some positive improvements in the 1960s. In spite of the establishment of many new universities in Saudi Arabia, the recruitment processes for faculty members were not managed transparently. This led to a limited autonomy of university departments, as they are managed by the Higher Education Council in accordance with governmental decisions. The current study also agrees with Maassen et al. (2017), which found that universities need to go beyond the scrutiny of formal arrangements, analyzing autonomy practices that help to achieve full autonomy of universities.

**Answer to the first sub-question: What are the administrative obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of the faculty?**

The computational averages and standard deviations of the responses of the sample members to the phrases related to the administrative impediments to the autonomy of Saudi universities were calculated as follows:

**Table 8**

*Responses of the Sample Members to the Administrative Constraints of Autonomy of Saudi Universities in Descending Order, According to Approval Averages*

| **N** | **Phrases** | **Average** | **Standard Deviation** | **Category** | **Level** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |
| 9 | Leaders in Saudi universities are appointed, not freely elected. | 4.12 | 1.119 | Strong | 1 |  |
| 7 | The University’s senior management is in full charge of decision-making. | 3.82 | 1.137 | Strong | 2 |  |
| 6 | Administrative centralization hinders the delegation of authority. | 3.80 | 1.195 | Strong | 3 |  |
| 13 | Commitment to the structural hierarchy in communication, within the university, is an obstacle to sustainable competitiveness. | 3.69 | 1.255 | Strong | 4 |  |
| 12 | The idleness of administrative structures negatively affects institutional performance. | 3.69 | 1.329 | Strong  | 5 |  |
| 5 | The complexity of administrative procedures within the university leads to delayed completion of tasks. | 3.64 | 1.193 | Strong  | 6 |  |
| 11 | The authority granted to the university to determine its future identity, independent of the Ministry of Education, is limited. | 3.52 | 1.141 | Strong  | 7 |  |
| 14 | The formation of committees is characterized by lack of objectivity and disregard for scientific standards. | 3.52 | 1.343 | Strong  | 8 |  |
| 1 | The rigidity of Higher Education Regulations hinders its ability to meet the needs of universities. | 3.51 | 1.054 | Strong  | 9 |  |
| 8 | Approval of the books taught in the courses of the department is restricted by the approval of the Scientific Council. | 3.49 | 1.260 | Strong  | 10 |  |
| 2 | The authority granted to the university for planning, supervision, and guidance is limited. | 3.48 | 1.297 | Strong  | 11 |  |
| 4 | The authority granted to the university to appoint faculty members is limited. | 3.38 | 1.373 | Medium | 12 |  |
| 3 | The authority granted to the university to engage in partnerships with the local community, independent of Ministry of Education dictates, is limited. | 3.32 | 1.313 | Medium | 13 |  |
| 10 | Restriction of the university’s authority in determining its identity (research/teaching/ technical( is apparent. | 3.13 | 1.291 | Medium | 14 |  |
| Overall Average | 3.58 | 0.845 | Strong |  |

Table 8 shows that the members of the study sample strongly agree regarding administrative impediments to autonomy for Saudi universities, with an average of (3.58 out of 5.00). In addition, the most prominent administrative impediments to autonomy for Saudi universities are in phrases numbers (9, 7, 6). Phrase number (9) reads as follows: “Leaders in Saudi universities are appointed, not freely elected.” This phrase places first, with an average of (4.12 out of 5). Then comes phrase number (7): “The University’s senior management is in full charge of decision-making.” It places second, with an average of (3.82 out of 5). Phrase number (6) is: “Administrative centralization hinders the delegation of authority.” It places third, with an average of (3.80 out of 5).

This indicates that universities suffer from a severe pattern of centralization and full control of universities by the Ministry of Education and other relevant authorities. The result of the current study is consistent with that of Ayan (2018), which found that, despite positive improvements, university administrations in Turkey have limited autonomy in making administrative decisions within their administrative bodies and are solely managed by the Higher Education Council in accordance with the decisions taken by the government.

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

**Answer to the second sub-question: What are the financial constraints to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of the faculty?**

The averages and standard deviations of the responses of the study sample to the phrases on the financial autonomy of the universities in Saudi Arabia were calculated. The results were as follows:

**Table 9**

*Responses of Sample Members to the Financial Constraints of Autonomy of Saudi Universities in Descending Order, According to Approval Averages*

| **N** | **Phrases** | **Calculation Average** | **Standard Deviation** | **Category** | **Level** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |
| 10 | Fees for graduate programs are high due to the absence of regulations. | 3.77 | 1.160 | Strong | 1 |  |
| 2 | The university is granted limited authority to benefit from the surplus funds from its annual, state-allocated budget. | 3.61 | 1.256 | Strong | 2 |  |
| 13 | Old regulatory frameworks that do not conform to modern demands restrict the university’s ability to invest in its buildings. | 3.56 | 1.305 | Strong | 3 |  |
| 11 | Obliging the university to transfer the fees of graduate programs to the general budget limits their use in the development of programs. | 3.51 | 1.334 | Strong | 4 |  |
| 3 | The university has limited authority to change the items of the budget, independently from the approval of the relevant authorities. | 3.49 | 1.120 | Strong | 5 |  |
| 1 | The powers granted to the university to activate its funds, independent from the regulations of the Ministry of Education, are limited. | 3.49 | 1.222 | Strong | 6 |  |
| 8 | The university has limited authority to hold investment partnerships with external companies without legal controls. | 3.38 | 1.245 | Medium | 7 |  |
| 9 | Costs of university education are high. | 3.37 | 1.389 | Medium | 8 |  |
| 4 | The university has limited authority to benefit from the returns of its research services, independent from legal frameworks regulating the process. | 3.36 | 1.163 | Medium | 9 |  |
| 6 | The budget of the university depends on sections with strict documentary control. | 3.36 | 1.242 | Medium | 10 |  |
| 12 | The university has limited control over its *waqf* returns. | 3.35 | 1.307 | Medium | 11 |  |
| 5 | The university has limited power in determining the budget that fits its goals. | 3.35 | 1.343 | Medium | 12 |  |
| 7 | Accepting *waqf* endowments as well as donations within the regulatory frameworks. | 3.05 | 1.337 | Medium | 13 |  |
| Overall Average | 3.43 | 0.958 | Strong |  |

Table 9 shows that the members of the study sample agree (significantly) regarding the financial constraints of autonomy for Saudi universities, with an average of (3.43 out of 5.00). The most prominent financial constraints to autonomy for Saudi universities are phrases (10, 2, 13). Phrase (10) is as follows: “The fees for graduate programs are high.” It ranked first, with an average of 3.77 out of 5. Phrase (2) is: “The university is granted limited authority to benefit from the surplus funds from its annual, state-allocated budget.” It placed second, with an average of (3.61 out of 5). Phrase (13) is: “Old regulatory frameworks that do not conform to modern demands restrict the university’s ability to invest in its buildings.” It ranked third, with an average of 3.56 out of 5.

The researcher attributes the high level of agreement shown here to the awareness of faculty members of the importance of the financial independence of universities. Universities receive generous funding from the government and it impacts the administration of the university. It is the gateway to the interference of sponsors in the affairs of the university, influencing university decisions. As a result, it is necessary to grant limited licenses. The government should be in charge of supervision and accountability of universities.

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 a better chance of improving the university’s financial position, as well as its potential for innovation, excellence, and quality academic products. Agasisti and Shibanova (2020) also noted the heterogeneity of the criteria by which universities are selected. This grants autonomy and 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: are these universities formally independent or not? And are they strictly accountable for how resources acquired from the private sector are redistributed or not?

**Answer to the third sub-question: What are the academic obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities from the point of view of faculty?**

The averages and standard deviations of the responses of the study sample to the phrases regarding the academic autonomy of universities in Saudi Arabia were calculated. The results are as follows:

**Table 10**

*Responses of the Study Sample Members Regarding Academic Obstacles to the Autonomy of Saudi Universities, Ranked Downwards by Approval Averages*

| **N** | **Phrases** | **Calculation Average** | **Standard Deviation** | **Category** | **Level** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |
| 3 | Absence of faculty associations to defend their interests. | 4.00 | 1.217 | Strong | 1 |  |
| 1 | Insufficient financial resources allocated to expand the network of graduate programs. | 3.80 | 1.263 | Strong | 2 |  |
| 4 | Lack of transparency regarding the university’s institutional performance reports, which are not shared with the relevant parties. | 3.77 | 1.305 | Strong | 3 |  |
| 14 | Limiting faculty members’ mobility by refusing to fund their academic activities if they are outside the region. | 3.75 | 1.235 | Strong | 4 |  |
| 5 | Inadequate participation of members of the academic community in decision-making regarding academic affairs. | 3.67 | 1.469 | Strong | 5 |  |
| 7 | There is a gap between the university’s outputs and labor market needs. | 3.56 | 1.359 | Strong | 6 |  |
| 11 | The freedom of faculty members to provide services to the private sector is restricted by regulatory frameworks. | 3.52 | 1.192 | Strong | 7 |  |
| 12 | Censoring the academic faculty’s contributions if they do not agree with the university’s instructions. | 3.45 | 1.211 | Strong | 8 |  |
| 8 | The university has limited power to launch a new college without the approval of the Higher Education Council | 3.45 | 1.377 | Strong | 9 |  |
| 2 | The limited powers of the university in making decisions related to the conduct of academic work, independently of the approval of the Ministry of Education. | 3.45 | 1.445 | Strong | 10 |  |
| 13 | Restricting the publication of faculty members’ research to certain scientific journals to score points in the university evaluation criteria. | 3.42 | 1.313 | Strong | 11 |  |
| 10 | The absence of freedom for faculty members to conduct scientific research in fields of interest, beyond their exact specialization. | 3.33 | 1.210 | Medium | 12 |  |
| 6 | Low performance of the university, both internally and externally. | 3.20 | 1.480 | Medium | 13 |  |
| 9 | The university has limited power to launch a new college without the approval of the Higher Education Council  | 2.98 | 1.311 | Medium | 14 |  |
| Overall average | 3.53 | 0.999 | Big |  |

Table 10 shows that the study sample members strongly agree with the academic constraints on the autonomy of Saudi universities, with an average of 3.53 out of 5.00.

The most prominent academic obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities are phrases number (3, 1, 4). Phrase (3) is: “Absence of faculty associations to defend their interests.” It places first, with an average of (4.00 out of 5). Phrase (1) is: “The lack of financial resources allocated to expand the network of graduate programs.” It places second, with an average of (3.80 out of 5). Phrase (4) is: “Lack of transparency regarding the university’s institutional performance reports, which are not shared with the relevant parties.” It places third, with an average of 3.77 out of 5.

These results are explained by the faculty members’ awareness of the obstacles to academic independence that prevent the university from achieving its academic goals. Any restriction to the university’s main objectives will limit the role of the university.

The results of the current study agree with the conclusion of St George (2019). Efforts to reach academic autonomy to improve the quality of higher education should be more precise, taking into account the internal dynamics of the state structure. In addition, Shabani et al. (2019) stressed the need to support autonomy in universities because of their role in maintaining scientific quality. They explained that academic independence has two dimensions: structure and content. The structural dimension consists of four components of independence: organizational, financial, policy-making, and national/regional. The content dimension includes three components of independence: academic/educational, scientific, and technological.

**Answer to the fourth sub-question: Are there statistically significant differences in the constraints of autonomy in Saudi universities, attributable to the study variables (Job Title and Number of Years of Experience)?**

1) Differences due to the variable “Job Title”:

The “one-way ANOVA variance analysis” was used to illustrate the significance of differences in the responses of the study sample members according to the Job Title variable. The results are as follows in Table 11:

**Table 11**

*Results of “One-Way ANOVA” for Differences in the Responses of Study Sample Individuals, According to the Job Title Variable*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Axis | Source of Variation | Total Boxes | Degrees of Freedom | Average Squares | Q Value | Statistical Significance | Commentary |
| Administrative barriers to independence | Between Groups | 1.407 | 3 | 0.469 | 0.655 | 0.580 | Insignificant |
| Within Groups | 237.793 | 332 | 0.716 |
| Total | 239.200 | 335 | - |
| Impediments to financial independence | Between Groups | 2.360 | 3 | 0.787 | 0.857 | 0.464 | Insignificant |
| Within Groups | 304.801 | 332 | 0.918 |
| Total | 307.161 | 335 | - |
| Barriers to academic independence | Between Groups | 2.185 | 3 | 0.728 | 0.728 | 0.536 | Insignificant |
| Within Groups | 332.208 | 332 | 1.001 |
| Total | 334.394 | 335 | - |
| Obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities | Between Groups | 0.383 | 3 | 0.128 | 0.166 | 0.920 | Insignificant |

The results shown in Table 11 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences at the level of (0.05) and lower in the views of the study sample members on the administrative, financial, and academic constraints to Saudi universities autonomy when the variable “Job Title” is applied.

2) Differences due to the variable “Number of Years of Experience”:

The “one-way ANOVA variance analysis” was used to illustrate the significance of differences in the responses of the study sample members according to the “Number of Years of Experience” variable:

**Table 12**

*Results of “One-Way ANOVA” for Differences in the Responses of Study Sample Individuals According to the Variable “Number of Years of Experience”*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Axis | Source of Variation | Total Boxes | Degrees of Freedom | Average Squares | Q value | Statistical Significance | Commentary |
| Administrative barriers to independence | Between Groups | 1.299 | 2 | 0.649 | 0.909 | 0.404 | Insignificant |
| Within Groups | 237.902 | 333 | 0.714 |
| Total | 239.200 | 335 | - |
| Impediments to financial independence | Between Groups | 9.939 | 2 | 4.969 | 5.568 | 0.004\*\* | Significant |
| Within Groups | 297.222 | 333 | 0.893 |
| Total | 307.161 | 335 | - |
| Barriers to academic independence | Between Groups | 0.893 | 2 | 0.446 | 0.446 | 0.641 | Insignificant |
| Within Groups | 333.501 | 333 | 1.002 |
| Total | 334.394 | 335 | - |
| Obstacles to the autonomy of Saudi universities | Between Groups | 1.250 | 2 | 0.625 | 0.815 | 0.443 | Insignificant |
| Within Groups | 255.387 | 333 | 0.767 |
| Total | 256.638 | 335 | - |

\*\* Function at the level of 0.01 and below

The results shown in Table 12 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences at the level of (0.05) and lower in the views of the study sample members on the administrative and academic constraints to Saudi universities autonomy when the variable “Number of Years of Experience” is applied.

However, there are statistically significant differences at the level of (0.01) and lower in the views of the study sample individuals on the impediments to financial independence when the variable “Number of Years of Experience” is applied.

To determine the differences between the categories in “Number of Years of Experience” variable, the Scheffe test was used. The results were as follows:

**Table 13**

*The Results of the Scheffe Test to Check the Differences Between the Categories in the Variable “Number of Years of Experience”*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Axis | Number of years of experience | Number | Calculation average | Less than 5 years | From 5 to 10 years | More than 10years |
| Impediments to financial independence | Less than 5 years | 80 | 3.16 | - |  | \*\* |
| From 5 years to 10 years | 128 | 3.43 |  | - |  |
| More than 10years | 128 | 3.61 |  |  | - |

\*\* Function at the level of 0.01 and below

The results shown in Table 13 indicate that there are statistically significant differences at the level of (0.01) and lower between the study sample members whose years of experience are less than 5 years, and those whose years of experience are more than 10 years, regarding financial independence impediments, in favor of the study sample members whose years of experience are more than 10 years.

The researcher attributes this to the fact that the study sample members who have experience of more than 10 years have greater familiarity with the administrative regulations and financial rules of universities than those who have less than 5 years experience.

**Study Recommendations**

In view of the findings, the researcher recommends:

\* Amending the university system and its regulations by the Ministry of Education and the relevant bodies to support self-regulation and social accountability, responding to social requirements in order to grant autonomy to Saudi universities.

\* Removing decision-making from centralization.

\* Appointing the leaders of Saudi universities through a free election mechanism.

\* Issuing instructions to leaders in Saudi universities to limit centralization at work and to delegate authority.

\* Working to reduce the high fees of graduate programs. Developing rules that direct and regulate the mechanism of determining the fees of programs in Saudi universities.

\* Increasing the powers granted to the university to benefit from the surplus funds of the budget allocated by the state annually.

\* Granting Saudi universities the freedom to invest in their buildings and resources in order to achieve investment partnership, including signing contracts with companies without restrictions.

\* Working on establishing associations concerned with the faculty members of Saudi universities to defend their interests.

\* Working to increase the financial resources allocated to expand the network of graduate programs in Saudi universities.

\* Insisting on transparency and clarity in the institutional performance reports of universities and granting the relevant parties the right to view them.

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