



Designing Autonomy for Impact: Addis Ababa University, Managed Autonomy, and the Knowledge Economy from a Global South Perspective

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Abstract: This article analyzes Ethiopia's transition toward university autonomy through the case of Addis Ababa University (AAU), the country's first formally autonomous public institution. It argues that autonomy should not be understood merely as a legal transfer of authority from the state to the university. Instead, autonomy must be treated as a design problem involving governance, leadership, finance, data systems, graduate education, and organizational culture. Rather than positioning Euro American autonomy models as universal benchmarks, the article advances a Global South framing in which African institutional experience generates theory rather than serving only as a site of application. The article introduces designed autonomy as a concept for understanding how public universities can build meaningful self governance while remaining anchored to national development and public value. Ethiopian Airlines Group is used not as a template for universities to copy, but as an African example of managed autonomy under state ownership—demonstrating how professional leadership, long term strategy, diversified revenue, and embedded performance accountability can coexist with public stewardship. Findings indicate that AAU possesses a strong legal mandate and strategic narrative, yet continues to face constraints in data integration, decision rights, graduate funding, cross unit accountability, and differentiated research capacity development. The article concludes that autonomy in African higher education should be theorized and implemented through context sensitive, globally plural, and decolonial lenses that recognize multiple pathways to institutional effectiveness rather than a single Western trajectory.

Keywords: University Autonomy, Higher Education Governance, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopian Higher Education, African Higher Education, Global South Scholarship, Decolonial Theory, Public Sector Reform, Institutional Effectiveness, Organizational Change

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia's higher education system is undergoing a dual transformation with implications that extend far beyond a single institution or policy cycle. First, the country is shifting from a highly centralized governance model toward a system in which public universities exercise greater academic, administrative, and financial discretion (Tamrat, 2023). Second, Ethiopia is pursuing a broader economic transition from labor-intensive development toward a knowledge-based economy in which universities are expected to generate research, cultivate advanced talent, support innovation, and contribute to national competitiveness. These transitions are deeply intertwined: the governance structures assigned to universities shape their ability to perform the developmental roles now expected of them.

Addis Ababa University (AAU) occupies a unique position in this national shift. Designated in August 2023 as Ethiopia's first formally autonomous public university, AAU is both symbolically and practically the prototype through which the operational meaning of autonomy is being defined (Tolcha, 2023). Its early decisions on leadership, admissions, data systems, budgeting, partnerships, and research organization will likely become reference points for peer institutions, ministries, and development partners. The central question is therefore not whether autonomy is desirable, but what institutional capacities, governance routines, and accountability mechanisms are required for autonomy to generate public value rather than symbolic decentralization.

Much of the influential literature on university autonomy and governance originates from Europe, North America, and international policy institutions shaped by those contexts (Clark, 1983; de Boer et al., 2007). This scholarship remains valuable—particularly where it clarifies distinctions among academic, organizational, staffing, and financial autonomy, or where it demonstrates how autonomy interacts with accountability, managerial capacity, and research performance (Aghion et al., 2010; Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023). Yet these frameworks also carry limitations when treated as universal reference points. They often assume historical trajectories, resource environments, state traditions, and institutional ecologies that differ significantly from those found in African public universities, especially those operating within developmental-state logics, rapid massification, fiscal constraint, and uneven administrative infrastructure.

A central premise of this article is that African universities should not be analyzed only as sites where external models are imperfectly implemented. They should also be understood as sites from which new conceptualizations of governance, institutional strategy, and public purpose can emerge (Woldegiorgis, 2021). For this reason, the article adopts an explicitly global and decolonial orientation. A decolonial approach does not reject Global North scholarship, nor does it romanticize local practice. Instead, it challenges the assumption that Western trajectories represent the only legitimate path to autonomy (Makinda, 2007). It takes Ethiopian institutional experience seriously as a source of analytical insight, placing AAU and Ethiopian Airlines at the center of the argument and asking how concepts such as autonomy, accountability, effectiveness, and excellence should be interpreted in a context where higher education is deeply entangled with national development, equity, state legitimacy, and South-South positioning.

The article develops **designed autonomy** as an alternative to minimalist legal interpretations of autonomy and overly universal governance models. Designed autonomy treats autonomy as a calibrated institutional system rather than a binary status. It asks whether authority is aligned with capability, whether accountability is developmental rather than punitive, whether finance and data systems support strategy, whether graduate education sustains research intensity, and whether organizational culture can shift from compliance toward coordinated execution. This formulation builds on prior work on Ethiopia's reform architecture (Adamu, 2026a) and extends it by embedding autonomy within broader Global South debates on public institutions, epistemic plurality, and multiple pathways to effective governance.

A second distinctive feature of the article is its use of Ethiopian Airlines Group as a comparative institutional analogy. The airline is not presented as a university model; universities and airlines differ fundamentally in mission, incentives, and accountability structures. Instead, Ethiopian Airlines illustrates an African example of **managed autonomy**

under public ownership—demonstrating that state stewardship and operational independence can coexist when leadership continuity, long-term strategy, diversified revenue, and embedded performance discipline are aligned (SOAS University of London, 2025; Ethiopian Airlines, n.d.). In a field where comparative analogies often default to elite Western universities or market-oriented governance reforms, Ethiopian Airlines offers a different lens rooted in African institutional achievement and developmental-state practice.

The evidence base for this article draws on three sources: a prior manuscript on designed autonomy in Ethiopian higher education (Waterman, 2026a); a 2026 executive assessment of AAU's readiness for effective autonomy (Waterman, 2026b); and a comparative analysis of research capacity and operating-model readiness across AAU's academic units (Waterman, 2026c). Together, these materials allow the article to move from conceptual framing to institutional diagnosis and then to broader implications for African management and higher education scholarship. The argument is not that AAU has already achieved effective autonomy, but that AAU reveals the central design challenge facing many African public universities: how to construct forms of self-governance that are strategic, data-literate, mission-anchored, and publicly accountable without simply reproducing external models that emerged under different historical conditions.

The discussion proceeds in six parts. The next section develops the conceptual framework by situating autonomy within mainstream governance scholarship and Global South critiques of universalized management theory. The third section outlines the qualitative case-study methodology. The fourth situates AAU within Ethiopia's legal and policy transition. The fifth presents Ethiopian Airlines as an analogy of managed autonomy. The sixth assesses AAU's readiness across governance, data, finance, strategic enrollment management, research capacity, quality assurance, and partnerships. The article concludes by arguing that autonomy must be designed through context-sensitive, publicly purposive, and globally plural frameworks if it is to contribute meaningfully to African knowledge-economy development.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Beyond Legal Autonomy

Autonomy in higher education is often framed as a matter of formal authority: the degree to which institutions are free from direct state control in areas such as curriculum, staffing, budgeting, leadership appointment, and student admissions (Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023). This perspective has generated useful typologies—distinguishing academic, financial, staffing, and organizational autonomy—and has clarified that autonomy is multidimensional rather than singular. Yet formal authority alone reveals little about whether an institution can act strategically, coordinate across units, use data effectively, diversify revenue responsibly, or sustain quality at scale. A university may possess broad legal discretion while remaining operationally constrained by fragmented data systems, unclear decision rights, weak middle management, limited graduate funding, or a compliance-oriented culture.

This distinction is especially salient in systems undergoing rapid reform. In such contexts, autonomy can be declared by law far more quickly than it can be enacted in practice. The result is often a gap between juridical autonomy and effective autonomy, in which institutions receive new responsibilities without the routines, information systems,

managerial depth, or accountability architecture required to execute them. Evidence from AAU reflects this pattern clearly (Adamu, 2026b). The university has a strong legal mandate and a widely understood strategic narrative, yet its operational capacity remains uneven across governance, data, budgeting, admissions, and quality assurance. Autonomy, therefore, is not a settled condition but an institutional design challenge.

Mainstream Governance Scholarship and Its Contributions

Mainstream higher education governance scholarship provides essential insights into this challenge. Clark's (1983) coordination triangle demonstrated how systems are shaped by shifting balances among state authority, market pressures, and academic oligarchy. Later work by de Boer, Enders, and Schimank (2007) showed how managerial authority, competition, stakeholder influence, and state steering can be recombined in new governance arrangements. The European University Association's Autonomy Scorecard further illustrated that autonomy varies significantly across countries and dimensions, undermining any binary notion of institutions being autonomous or not (Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023). Research by Aghion and colleagues (2010) linked institutional discretion to research performance under specific conditions, particularly strong leadership and credible organizational capability. Marginson (2011) and Jungblut and Dobbins (2021) emphasized that governance must be interpreted in relation to public goods, multi-level policy environments, and diverse stakeholder claims rather than through narrow market logics.

These contributions remain analytically valuable. They help explain why increased institutional discretion alters incentive structures, why managerial authority tends to expand under performance-based reforms, why accountability systems reconfigure internal power dynamics, and why public purpose cannot be separated from governance design. They also clarify that governance reform is never a simple shift from "control" to "freedom," but a rebalancing of multiple authorities, expectations, and performance regimes (de Boer et al., 2007). For AAU, these insights matter because Ethiopia's reforms reduce some forms of direct state control while increasing pressure for performance contracting, strategic differentiation, and managerial coordination (Tamrat, 2023).

However, these bodies of scholarship are not neutral or universally complete. They emerged largely from contexts with longer histories of bureaucratic consolidation, more stable data infrastructures, different fiscal contracts between state and university, and often stronger institutional differentiation. When imported into African contexts without reflexive adjustment, they can encourage a subtle teleology in which non-Western systems are measured primarily by their distance from European or North American norms (Woldegiorgis, 2021). A decolonial approach does not discard these frameworks; it provincializes them. It treats them as important but partial, opening conceptual space for other institutional experiences and other grammars of public purpose (Makinda, 2007).

Decolonial and Global South Critiques

Decolonial critiques of management and education scholarship argue that global knowledge production has long privileged Euro-American categories, histories, and models while rendering other epistemologies derivative or exceptional (Makinda, 2007). In management education, calls to decolonize the curriculum emphasize that diversifying examples is

insufficient unless underlying assumptions about authority, rationality, development, and institutional success are also reconsidered (AACSB International, 2023). Similar critiques in global education governance highlight the dominance of policy languages shaped by OECD, World Bank, and Northern university systems, often at the expense of locally grounded understandings of public obligation, community, justice, and institutional legitimacy (Woldegiorgis, 2021).

Applied to university autonomy, this critique raises fundamental questions: Whose conception of the university informs reform? Whose model of organizational effectiveness is being used? What counts as evidence of success, and whose knowledge traditions are recognized?

If autonomy is defined solely in terms of insulation from the state, market responsiveness, or rankings performance, crucial developmental and social commitments may be displaced (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2015). In many African contexts, universities serve multiple roles: they are sites of teaching and research, but also public institutions expected to support state capacity, professional formation, social mobility, linguistic and cultural reproduction, and long-term national transformation. A governance model that ignores these roles simply carries the assumptions of a different history.

A Global South perspective therefore requires more than adding non-Western examples to existing frameworks. It requires allowing institutional experiences from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and post-socialist contexts to generate concepts (Makinda, 2007). This article does so in two ways: by treating AAU's reform process as a site of theory-building about designed autonomy, and by using Ethiopian Airlines—a globally competitive African state-owned enterprise—to illustrate how managed autonomy can function outside the Western institutional histories that dominate much management theory (SOAS University of London, 2025). Together, these cases suggest that institutional autonomy can be publicly anchored, strategically disciplined, and nationally developmental without being reducible to privatization, marketization, or imported governance templates.

Designed Autonomy

The concept of **designed autonomy** synthesizes these insights. It begins from the observation that autonomy is not naturally achieved once legal barriers are removed. Instead, autonomy must be constructed through deliberate alignment of authority, incentives, capacities, and accountability (Waterman, 2026a). Designed autonomy is neither state withdrawal nor managerial free play. It is the calibrated exercise of institutional discretion in service of public mission, organizational capability, and performance visibility.

Five elements define this formulation:

1. **Mission anchoring.** Institutional discretion must be exercised in service of explicit public purposes such as knowledge production, human capital development, equitable access, innovation capacity, and social contribution (Marginson, 2011). This is especially important in Ethiopia and other African contexts where universities are expected to support nation-building and developmental transformation (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2015).

2. **Alignment of authority and capability.** Legal discretion without managerial competence, process ownership, or professional middle management produces paralysis rather than innovation. AAU illustrates this challenge: decision rights remain unclear, cross-unit workflows lack consistent ownership, and administrative systems are not yet robust enough to support autonomous execution at scale (Waterman, 2026b).
3. **Developmental accountability.** Accountability is not an external constraint added after autonomy; it is a constitutive element of autonomy. Performance contracts, block grants, and quality reviews should create strategic direction and learning rather than impose punitive sanctions disconnected from institutional starting points (Aghion et al., 2010). This principle is essential in systems with uneven readiness, where blunt performance regimes can magnify inequality.
4. **Financial and informational infrastructure.** A university cannot govern itself meaningfully if it cannot see itself. Program costing, revenue diversification, integrated student-lifecycle data, research dashboards, and quality evidence are not technical add-ons; they are the informational and fiscal foundations of strategic choice (Waterman, 2026b).
5. **Cultural transformation.** Even with legal authority, budgets, and systems in place, institutions may continue to operate through inherited logics of compliance, hierarchy, or fragmentation. Effective autonomy requires new habits of coordination, evidence use, cross-unit accountability, and strategic stewardship. These cultural shifts must be cultivated through leadership behavior, incentives, shared routines, and visible institutional wins.

Strategic Enrollment Management as a Governance Lever

One implication of designed autonomy is that admissions and enrollment must be understood as governance questions rather than administrative subfunctions. In many research universities, especially those facing fiscal pressure and global talent competition, Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) links academic planning, revenue logic, student support, graduate growth, and institutional positioning (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). This is particularly salient in Ethiopia, where graduate education is central to research intensity, yet admissions systems have historically been shaped by centralized rules that create bottlenecks and limit internationalization capacity (Waterman, 2026b).

Managed Autonomy as an African Institutional Logic

The final component of the conceptual framework is **managed autonomy**, which captures the idea that autonomy and state ownership are not opposites. In developmental-state settings, public institutions may remain publicly owned and publicly mandated while gaining sufficient operational discretion to plan long-term, recruit strategically, allocate resources, and build organizational capability. Ethiopian Airlines demonstrates one version of this logic through leadership continuity, professionalized governance, diversified revenue, and embedded performance accountability under state ownership (SOAS University of London, 2025; Ethiopian Airlines, n.d.).

For AAU, the lesson is not to mimic the airline's commercial model. The more useful transfer is structural: universities also require clarity of authority, leadership continuity, disciplined execution, reliable information, and diversified resources to operate effectively under autonomy. Ethiopian Airlines thus serves as a counterweight to the assumption that African institutions must look to Western universities or private-sector orthodoxy for governance models. It demonstrates that African institutional experience can itself generate conceptual insights about governance and public-sector effectiveness (Makinda, 2007).

Designed autonomy is not a rejection of global theory. Rather, it offers a more plural theory of institutional governance that allows African practice to shape the concepts through which reform is understood. It asks not whether AAU approximates a Western endpoint, but whether it can build an effective, publicly purposive, contextually grounded form of autonomy aligned with Ethiopia's developmental aspirations.

Methodology and Evidence Base

This study employs a qualitative institutional case-study design centered on Addis Ababa University's transition to autonomy. A case-study approach is appropriate because the phenomenon under examination is complex, multidimensional, and deeply embedded in organizational and policy context. The goal is not statistical generalization but analytical interpretation: to understand how autonomy is being constructed, where operational constraints lie, and what broader conceptual lessons can be drawn for African university governance.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the evidence base was reviewed through a domain-based lens encompassing governance and decision rights; operations; information technology and data; budget and finance; strategic enrollment management and graduate admissions; quality assurance and risk; research and graduate education; partnerships; communications; and student support (Waterman, 2026b). Second, these domains were interpreted through the conceptual framework of designed autonomy, with attention to authority-capability alignment, developmental accountability, data infrastructure, public mission, and organizational culture. Third, Ethiopian Airlines was used as a comparative institutional analogy to identify which features of managed autonomy may be structurally transferable across organizational forms and which are specific to the university context.

The strength of this methodological approach lies in its ability to connect policy analysis with institutional practice. Rather than examining autonomy solely at the level of legal reform, the study follows the reform into the university's operating surfaces: who decides, how data flows, how admissions are organized, how quality is reviewed, and how research capacity is funded. This provides a grounded basis for theorizing autonomy from an African institutional setting and for understanding how governance reforms interact with organizational capability.

Ethiopia's Autonomy Transition and AAU's Prototype Role

Ethiopia's higher education system has expanded dramatically over the past two decades, growing from fewer than ten public universities to forty-seven in a relatively brief period

(Tamrat, 2023). This expansion widened access but also strained funding, quality assurance, research capacity, and governance coherence. Tertiary enrollment increased substantially from the low levels of the early 1990s yet remains below global averages. Meanwhile, per-student public funding has declined, and institutional differentiation remains limited (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2022). The result is a system that has become larger and more socially significant while confronting sharper questions of quality, coordination, and sustainability.

The legal architecture of reform reflects these tensions. A sequence of proclamations—including Proclamation No. 650/2009, Proclamation No. 1152/2019, and the University Autonomy Proclamation No. 1294/2023—progressively redefined the relationship between the state and public universities (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2009, 2019, 2023). The latest framework grants academic, administrative, and financial self-governance within a broader performance-accountability regime and affirms that state support remains necessary to preserve equitable access (Tolcha, 2023). This arrangement is significant because it does not imagine autonomy as privatization or state withdrawal. Instead, it envisions a new relationship in which institutions gain greater discretion while remaining publicly funded, publicly obligated, and increasingly performance visible.

AAU's designation as the first formally autonomous university in August 2023 gave concrete form to this policy shift. The university is therefore both beneficiary and testing ground. Its 2024-2028 strategic plan articulates reform priorities across governance, academic revision, quality assurance, digital transformation, financial diversification, research, internationalization, student experience, and community engagement (Addis Ababa University, 2024). Internal awareness of the reform direction appears relatively strong, and policy work has begun in areas such as admissions, legislation, internationalization, endowment development, and resource mobilization (Waterman, 2026b).

At the same time, AAU's prototype role exposes the fragility of autonomy when enabling conditions lag legal reform. The executive assessment identifies uneven readiness across nearly every domain of implementation (Waterman, 2026b). Governance authority is legally established but internally ambiguous; operations depend on capable units but lack standardized workflows; the IT and data architecture is fragmented; financial systems lack integrated program costing and multi-year performance logic; and admissions, partnerships, communications, and quality routines require substantial redesign. AAU thus represents autonomy in motion—neither absent nor achieved but actively being assembled.

Ethiopian Airlines and the Logic of Managed Autonomy

Ethiopian Airlines appears in this analysis as an analogy rather than a model to be replicated. Universities and airlines differ fundamentally in mission, incentive structures, and accountability environments. Nonetheless, Ethiopian Airlines offers a compelling African example of **managed autonomy** under state ownership. It has achieved global competitiveness while remaining publicly owned, demonstrating that state stewardship and organizational independence can coexist when governance is designed effectively (SOAS University of London, 2025; Ethiopian Airlines, n.d.). Four features of the airline's governance model are particularly relevant (Waterman, 2026a):

1. **Leadership continuity and professionalization.** The airline has benefited from stable, professional leadership that has maintained strategic direction over time.
2. **Diversified revenue streams.** Ethiopian Airlines has built multiple income sources rather than relying on a single funding base, enabling resilience and long-term planning.
3. **Long-term strategic planning.** The organization operates with a multi-decade strategic horizon rather than short-cycle reactive management.
4. **Embedded performance accountability.** Performance discipline is integrated into operations in ways that support, rather than undermine, strategic autonomy.

These characteristics matter because they demonstrate that an African public institution can combine national mission with global competitiveness without abandoning public ownership. For AAU, the lesson is not to emulate the airline's commercial model but to adapt the underlying governance logic: clarity of authority, leadership continuity, disciplined execution, reliable information, and diversified resources are essential for effective autonomy in any public institution.

Ethiopian Airlines thus serves as a counterweight to the assumption that African institutions must look to Western universities or private-sector management orthodoxy for governance models. It illustrates that African institutional experience can itself generate conceptual insights about governance, capability, and public-sector effectiveness (Makinda, 2007).

FINDINGS: AAU'S AUTONOMY READINESS

Governance and Decision Rights

AAU's legal authority as an autonomous university is clearly established, yet the institutional mechanisms required to exercise that authority remain underdeveloped (Waterman, 2026b). Stakeholder consultations and executive assessments consistently highlight unresolved questions regarding who holds decision-making power over program portfolios, graduate admissions criteria, partnership approvals, data definitions, and cross-cutting strategic priorities. This ambiguity produces two risks. One is **over-centralization**, in which decisions are escalated to the President's Office because lower-level authority is unclear. The other is **fragmentation**, in which colleges or units act independently in ways that undermine institutional coherence. Both patterns are incompatible with effective autonomy because they replace designed governance with improvisation. The assessment therefore emphasizes the need for codified decision rights, a transition from personality-based to system-based governance, and the establishment of clear cross-unit workflows that support coordinated execution.

Operations and Administrative Systems

Operational capability is uneven across AAU's administrative units. Some offices demonstrate strong professional competence, while others lack standardized processes, clear workflow ownership, or adequate staffing. Many operational routines remain dependent on individual effort rather than institutionalized systems. This creates

vulnerability: when key individuals are absent or overloaded, processes stall. The absence of standardized operating procedures (SOPs), service-level expectations, and cross-unit coordination mechanisms limits AAU's ability to function as an integrated institution. Autonomy increases the importance of operational reliability, making the development of consistent administrative routines essential for institutional performance.

IT and Data Architecture

AAU's data systems are fragmented, with limited integration across student information, finance, human resources, research management, and quality assurance platforms. Many units maintain parallel spreadsheets or manual records, creating inconsistencies and limiting the university's ability to generate reliable, real-time information.

This fragmentation undermines strategic planning, program costing, enrollment management, research monitoring, and quality assurance. A university cannot govern itself effectively if it cannot see itself clearly. The assessment identifies the need for an integrated data architecture, standardized data definitions, and a central analytics function capable of supporting evidence-based decision-making.

Budget and Finance

AAU's financial systems lack the tools required for autonomous governance. Program costing is incomplete, revenue streams are insufficiently diversified, and multi-year budgeting is not yet embedded in financial planning. Without clear cost structures, the university cannot make informed decisions about program expansion, graduate growth, or resource allocation.

Autonomy requires a shift from compliance-based budgeting to **strategic financial management**, including:

- multi-year budget frameworks
- transparent internal allocation models
- diversified revenue strategies
- financial dashboards for leadership and colleges

These elements are essential for aligning financial decisions with academic priorities and long-term strategy.

Strategic Enrollment Management and Graduate Admissions

Graduate education is central to AAU's research mission, yet admissions systems remain constrained by legacy rules, manual processes, and limited data visibility. Bottlenecks in admissions slow graduate growth, restrict internationalization, and limit AAU's ability to align enrollment with research priorities.

A Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) approach would link admissions, academic planning, student support, and financial strategy. This requires:

- integrated admissions data

- clear graduate funding models
- differentiated admissions criteria by program
- proactive international recruitment
- coordinated enrollment forecasting.

Without these elements, AAU cannot fully leverage autonomy to strengthen its research profile.

Research Capacity and Graduate Education

Research capacity varies widely across AAU's colleges and institutes. Some units possess strong academic leadership, active research cultures, and external partnerships, while others face shortages of doctoral faculty, limited laboratory infrastructure, or insufficient graduate funding. This unevenness constrains AAU's ability to function as a comprehensive research university.

Autonomy creates an opportunity to differentiate research investment, strengthen doctoral training, and build targeted capacity in priority fields. However, this requires:

- clear research-intensity criteria
- transparent allocation of research funds
- structured mentorship and supervisory development
- improved grant management systems
- stronger linkages between graduate education and national development priorities

Without these reforms, research performance will remain inconsistent across the institution.

Quality Assurance and Risk Management

Quality assurance processes exist but are not yet fully embedded in academic or administrative routines. Program reviews, course evaluations, and risk assessments are conducted inconsistently across units. Quality evidence is often descriptive rather than analytical, limiting its usefulness for decision-making. Autonomy increases the importance of internal quality assurance because external oversight becomes less directive. AAU will require:

- standardized program review cycles
- evidence-based quality indicators
- risk registers and mitigation plans
- stronger internal audit and compliance functions
- integration of quality data into strategic planning

These elements are essential for ensuring that autonomy strengthens, rather than weakens, academic standards.

Partnerships and External Engagement

AAU maintains numerous partnerships, but coordination is limited and many agreements lack clear performance expectations or monitoring mechanisms. Partnerships are often initiated at the college or department level without alignment to institutional strategy.

Autonomy provides an opportunity to reposition partnerships as strategic assets. This requires:

- a centralized partnership registry
- standardized MoU templates and approval processes
- performance monitoring frameworks
- alignment with research priorities and national development goals

Without these structures, partnership activity risks remaining fragmented and underleveraged.

Communications and Institutional Narrative

AAU possesses a strong strategic narrative centered on autonomy, research excellence, and national development. However, internal communication is inconsistent, and many staff and faculty members lack clarity about the implications of autonomy for their roles. External communication is similarly fragmented, limiting AAU's ability to project a coherent institutional identity.

Effective autonomy requires a shared narrative that aligns internal stakeholders and strengthens external legitimacy. This includes:

- consistent messaging across units
- clear communication of decision rights
- transparent reporting on progress and challenges
- proactive engagement with government, partners, and the public

A strong narrative is not cosmetic; it is a governance tool that shapes expectations and builds institutional coherence.

Student Support and Experience

Student support services—including advising, counseling, career development, and academic support—are uneven across colleges. Many services are understaffed or lack standardized processes. As AAU seeks to expand graduate education and international enrollment, student support will become increasingly important for retention, research productivity, and institutional reputation.

Autonomy provides an opportunity to strengthen student services through:

- centralized support hubs
- data-informed advising

- expanded counseling and wellness services
- structured career development programs
- improved digital service delivery.

These elements are essential for building a student-centered research university.

Synthesis

Across all domains, AAU's readiness for autonomy is characterized by a strong legal mandate and strategic vision but uneven operational capacity. The university is not starting from zero; many units demonstrate professionalism, commitment, and emerging capability. However, autonomy requires a shift from fragmented, personality-driven routines to integrated, system-based governance. The central challenge is not legal authority but institutional design: aligning decision rights, data systems, financial models, research capacity, and organizational culture to support effective self-governance.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Conclusion: Designing Autonomy for Public Purpose in African Higher Education

Ethiopia's transition toward university autonomy represents one of the most consequential governance reforms in its contemporary higher education history. Addis Ababa University, as the first formally autonomous public university, stands at the center of this transformation. Its experience demonstrates that autonomy is not achieved through legal proclamation alone. Instead, autonomy must be **designed**, constructed through the alignment of authority, capability, accountability, data, finance, and organizational culture.

The analysis presented in this article shows that AAU possesses a strong legal mandate and a compelling strategic narrative yet continues to face significant operational constraints. These include fragmented data systems, unclear decision rights, uneven administrative capacity, limited graduate funding, inconsistent quality assurance routines, and wide variation in research readiness across academic units. These constraints do not negate the value of autonomy; rather, they reveal the institutional design work required to make autonomy meaningful.

The concept of **designed autonomy** offers a framework for this work. Designed autonomy emphasizes mission anchoring, authority-capability alignment, developmental accountability, financial and informational infrastructure, and cultural transformation. It reframes autonomy not as a binary condition but as a calibrated system that must be intentionally constructed over time. This approach is particularly relevant in African contexts, where universities are expected to serve broad public purposes—supporting state capacity, professional formation, social mobility, and national development—while operating under fiscal constraint and rapid system expansion.

The analogy of **managed autonomy** drawn from Ethiopian Airlines further illustrates that public ownership and operational independence are not mutually exclusive. The airline's experience demonstrates that African institutions can achieve global competitiveness through professional leadership, long-term strategy, diversified revenue,

and embedded performance accountability. While universities differ fundamentally from airlines, the underlying governance logic—clarity of authority, disciplined execution, reliable information, and strategic coherence—offers valuable insights for AAU and other public universities navigating autonomy.

More broadly, this article argues for a **Global South and decolonial framing** of university autonomy. African universities should not be understood merely as sites where external models are imperfectly implemented. They are also sites of theory-building, capable of generating new conceptualizations of governance, institutional effectiveness, and public purpose. A globally plural approach to autonomy recognizes that multiple pathways exist, shaped by history, political economy, institutional ecology, and national development priorities.

For Ethiopia, the success of autonomy will depend on whether institutions can build the capabilities required for effective self-governance while remaining anchored to public value. For African higher education scholarship, the challenge is to articulate frameworks that reflect the realities, aspirations, and institutional achievements of the continent. Designed autonomy offers one such framework—one that is context-sensitive, publicly purposive, and open to multiple trajectories of institutional development.

AAU's journey is still unfolding. Its progress will shape not only its own future but also the trajectory of autonomy across Ethiopia's higher education system. As autonomy expands to other universities, the lessons from AAU's experience—its strengths, constraints, and emerging innovations—will provide critical guidance for designing governance systems that support research excellence, equitable access, national development, and Africa's broader knowledge-economy ambitions.

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