TOWARDS AN AUTONOMOUS AND SELF-SUSTAINING MODEL OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN AFRICA

Peter Yidana (Ph.D.)

Directorate of Academic Affairs,
C. K. Tedam University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Navrongo.

Email: pyidana@cktutas.edu.gh

ABSTRACT: *Higher education institutions in Africa are expected to advance knowledge production, drive economic development, and preserve cultural heritage. However, their capacity to fulfil these roles is constrained by limited institutional autonomy, restricted academic freedom, and weak meritocracy. This study sought to develop a governance model that strengthens institutional independence while promoting long-term financial and academic sustainability. Drawing insights from institutional autonomy and resource dependence theories, the study employed a conceptual and document analysis approach grounded in scholarly literature, regulatory frameworks, and institutional policy documents. The analysis revealed persistent vulnerabilities linked to state overregulation, financial dependence, and inadequate institutional adaptability. In response, the study proposes an eight-pillar governance model that emphasises autonomous governance, academic freedom and research relevance, financial diversification and sustainability, innovation-oriented teaching and learning, community engagement and societal impact, enterprise and industry linkages, institutional resilience and sustainability, and accountability and quality assurance. The model provides a strategic framework for building resilient, high-performing institutions aligned with global standards. The study offers policymakers and higher education leaders' actionable directions for reform to enhance autonomy, improve institutional effectiveness, and support the long-term development of African universities.*

KEYWORDS: Higher education model, Autonomy, Academic freedom, Meritocracy, Financial sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are widely recognized as centers of knowledge generation, research, and teaching. Beyond these core functions, universities contribute to national development by fostering social transformation, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting innovation. The effective fulfillment of these roles depends on the protection of core academic values, most notably institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and meritocracy.

Institutional autonomy refers to the ability of universities to regulate their internal affairs, including decisions about curriculum design, teaching methods, research priorities, and governance structures (Ndereyimana, 2021). Academic freedom, similarly, safeguards the right of scholars to teach, research, and publish without undue interference or censorship (Kori, 2016). Meritocracy ensures that appointments, promotions, and student admissions are based on competence and achievement rather than political, ethnic, or social considerations. Collectively, these values form the foundation of a credible and high-performing academic system.

Although many African countries, including Ghana, enshrine academic freedom and institutional autonomy in constitutional and statutory provisions, these protections are frequently undermined in practice. Persistent political interference, control over research agendas, censorship of sensitive scholarly work, and the distortion of recruitment processes through patronage have been widely documented. A recent example is the dispute between the University of Cape Coast and the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), in which the regulator overstepped its mandate by intervening directly in the university's leadership succession process and imposing sanctions when the university resisted (myjoyonline.com, 2025). Similar instances of state overreach have been noted across Nigeria and other African higher education systems (Niyi et al., 2024). These episodes underscore the fragile nature of academic values on the continent.

A key driver of this vulnerability is the structural dependence of public universities on state funding. Heavy reliance on government subventions for salaries, infrastructure, and research creates power asymmetries that limit institutional autonomy and weaken internal governance. When regulatory bodies employ funding or accreditation processes as instruments of control, universities may be compelled to compromise academic values in order to maintain operational stability. Such dependence not only undermines institutional credibility but also constrains innovation, reduces international competitiveness, and jeopardizes long-term sustainability.

These tensions reveal the limitations of prevailing models of higher education governance in Africa, which often fail to promote autonomy, protect academic freedom, or reduce vulnerability to political interference. Consequently, there is a growing need for a governance framework that is both contextually relevant and globally competitive, one that balances state oversight with institutional independence, supports financial resilience, and creates an enabling environment for intellectual excellence.

This paper responds to that need by proposing a reimagined model for African higher education that strengthens institutional autonomy, safeguards academic freedom, and promotes financial sustainability. The model integrates principles of governance, innovation, community engagement, and quality assurance to offer a more resilient and development-oriented framework for higher education reform on the continent.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the structural and governance limitations of existing higher education systems in Africa and to develop a model that strengthens institutional autonomy, financial sustainability, and academic freedom.

Research Questions

1. What key principles of sustainability and institutional autonomy can be identified from existing global university governance models?

2. What structural and governance challenges limit institutional autonomy and financial sustainability within African universities?

3. What essential elements should inform a contextually relevant governance model that strengthens institutional autonomy, protects academic freedom, and promotes financial sustainability in African higher education systems?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theories: institutional autonomy and resource dependence theories. Institutional autonomy theory suggests that universities require freedom in governance, finance, staffing, and academics to fulfill their mandate effectively (Fielden, 2008). The theory posits that autonomy empowers universities to manage resources effectively, formulate strategic priorities, and respond to societal needs without undue interference from governments or external stakeholders. The resource-dependence theory posits that organizations rely on external resources for survival and must manage power relations with resource providers to minimize their vulnerability (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In the university context, reliance on government subventions, donor funding, and student fees often constrains institutional freedom. Together, these theories demonstrate that university autonomy and sustainability are not isolated goals but interconnected outcomes. Autonomy enables innovation and resilience, while financial independence guarantees institutional autonomy academic freedom and innovation. The theories are employed to explain how an autonomous and self-sustaining higher education system can be achieved through financial independence.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach, drawing on a systematic literature review and document analysis to develop an exploratory model of an autonomous and self-sustaining higher education system. This desk-based approach is suitable because the study aimed to synthesize and critically analyze existing knowledge, rather than collect new empirical data. In this context, the study used a systematic review of the literature and an analysis of related documents. Bowen (2009) suggests that document analysis offers a straightforward approach to reviewing institutional policies, reports, and records. This method helps researchers draw meaning, gain insights, and build knowledge from existing sources. Likewise, systematic literature reviews enable researchers to combine various scholarly viewpoints while ensuring transparency and thoroughness in selecting, analyzing, and summarizing earlier studies (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

The use of these methods is particularly justified in higher education research, where issues of institutional autonomy and sustainability are deeply embedded in governance frameworks, funding arrangements, and regulatory policies. Document analysis offers a means to examine key texts, such as strategic plans, national education policies, and university charters, thereby revealing the formal structures and implicit assumptions that shape institutional practices (Bowen, 2009). Coupled with a systematic review of the academic literature, this approach helps to uncover conceptual gaps and identify the theoretical insights necessary for constructing a new model (Randolph, 2009). By relying on existing authoritative sources, the study ensures both analytical depth and contextual relevance.

Moreover, combining a literature review with document analysis strengthens the exploratory model-building design adopted in this research. A literature review synthesizes broad theoretical and empirical insights, while a document analysis grounds the model in the practical realities of policy and institutional practice. This dual approach is consistent with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) assertion that qualitative methods are well-suited for building initial theoretical propositions in under-researched domains. Thus, the chosen method provides a rigorous, context-sensitive foundation for conceptualizing pathways toward an autonomous and self-sustaining higher education system.

Research design

The study employed an exploratory model-building research design to conduct the investigation. This design aims to create new conceptual models instead of testing existing ones. Stebbins (2001) suggests that the exploratory model-building research design is functional when models are still being formed and current frameworks offer limited explanations. Since existing models of the higher education system pose challenges in the areas of autonomy and sustainability, the exploratory research design enabled the researcher to inductively identify relevant variables and structural relationships that are not captured in all the models (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

The research design used flexible methods. It combined qualitative insights with quantitative data to improve theoretical ideas gradually. This flexibility is significant when examining less-explored topics, such as how a university can become self-sustainable in Sub-Saharan Africa. By basing the model on real-world situations and allowing for some theory-building, this

design ensures that the resulting framework is relevant to the context and can be applied in future studies (Bollen & Pearl, 2013).

Search strategy

The researcher reviewed policy documents and empirical studies related to models of higher education systems, with a focus on autonomy, academic freedom, and sustainability. With regard to research articles, the researcher searched three electronic databases: Scopus, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Google Scholar, with the following keywords:

1.   Higher education models/systems

2.   University autonomy

3.   Financial sustainability

4.   Financial resilience

5.   Resource dependence

6.   Academic freedom

7.   Sustainability in higher education

8.   Governance in higher education

9.   Autonomy challenges with the current university system/models

The keywords were combined using the Boolean operator "OR" to maximize the retrieval of relevant literature. The search was undertaken between January 19, 2025, and August 20, 2025, to identify research publications and related documents on the subject matter.

The document corpus interrogated comprised formal institutional texts that are directly related to academic freedom, autonomy, governance, and organizational power dynamics. These documents span a time frame of approximately 10–15 years, covering a period of significant reform in the higher education landscape. The issuing bodies include the university's central administration and, in some cases, national-level agencies such as the Ministry of Education. By analyzing texts from multiple governance levels and time periods, the study aimed to capture both continuity and change in how autonomy, academic freedom, and sustainability are influenced in higher education institutions.

Sampling strategy

This study employed a purposive sample technique to identify documents most relevant to the research goal of examining power dynamics within a centralized university system. The purposive sampling is ideal in qualitative document analysis because it allows the researcher to actively select texts that are rich in information and directly relevant to the study's conceptual and analytical goals (Patton, 2015).

The documents were chosen for analysis because they relate to key aspects of institutional power, such as decision-making independence, sources of income, procedures for appointments and promotions, and rules for governance between organizations. These factors

are essential for understanding the current situation of institutional independence, academic freedom, and sustainability within the universities' complex governance system (Tight, 2014).

Data collection procedure

Access to Documents: The data for this study were collected exclusively through documentary sources obtained from a combination of publicly accessible and institutionally held repositories.

Primary access points included the official websites of the selected University and relevant national regulatory bodies, particularly the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) and the Ministry of Education. These platforms host a variety of publicly available documents, such as strategic plans, annual reports, governance structures, and policy frameworks.

Additional materials such as university council minutes, internal policy manuals, and organizational charts were accessed through institutional archives and internal administrative offices, following formal permission and clearance procedures. Access requests were made through official correspondence with the University's Registrar's Office and Planning and Quality Assurance Directorate, where applicable.

Efforts were made to ensure that all documents included in the study were authentic, complete, and verifiable, in line with best practices in qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009; O'Leary, 2014). When possible, multiple versions of the same document type (e.g., consecutive annual reports or successive strategic plans) were retrieved to allow for longitudinal comparison and thematic evolution.

Data analysis

The researcher employed a qualitative data analysis procedure, consistent with a systematic literature review and document analysis. The study relied exclusively on secondary sources. As a result, the analysis procedure aimed to extract, interpret, and synthesize the meanings embedded within both scholarly and institutional texts. This approach ensured analytical depth while grounding the findings in authoritative evidence.

Analytical framework

The researcher employed qualitative content analysis, which enabled the systematic grouping and interpretation of textual data. This procedure enabled the researcher to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships. The coding framework was guided by the research's theoretical framework, which included institutional autonomy, resource dependence, organizational resilience, and knowledge economy theories. The study's initial coding included financial autonomy, academic freedom, resource allocation, financial sustainability, and accountability. The study then employed inductive coding to capture emergent issues that were not initially anticipated.

Procedure for document analysis

The study employed Bowen's (2009) guidelines for document analysis. The guidelines included three iterative steps: skimming, reading, and interpretation. The researcher scanned each document to identify relevant sections before subjecting it to close reading and thematic coding. During interpretations, attention was paid not only to explicit statements but also to

underlying assumptions, contradictions, and omissions. The study, in most cases, compared documents spanning different periods to capture thematic evolution over time.

Systematic review of literature

The synthesis of the empirical literature process was guided by transparency and rigor (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). Replicability was ensured by documenting the inclusion and exclusion of studies using a PRISMA-inspired process. Narrative synthesis was used to integrate the findings (Pope, Mays, & Popay, 2007). This included highlighting conceptual and empirical gaps, comparing perspectives across different contexts, and providing thematic summaries of the results. This step was essential for determining how the relationship between autonomy, governance, and sustainability in higher education is explained or overlooked in the current literature.

Triangulation and model development

The researcher relied on insights from policy documents and the scholarly literature to triangulate the findings, thereby strengthening validity and reducing bias. The researcher first examined the convergences and divergences between institutional texts and academic critiques. Through iterative comparison, the study consolidated the thematic clusters into a tentative exploratory model that links sustainability, innovation, and institutional autonomy. The study then used conceptual diagramming techniques (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) to visualize the structural relationships among the identified variables. This procedure extended the analysis beyond description to theoretical abstraction, thereby enabling the construction of a model that can serve as a foundation for future empirical testing (Stebbins, 2001).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis are presented in accordance with the research questions that guided the study. Findings are reported in two stages: (a) descriptive accounts that present what policy documents and scholarly texts reveal about governance and sustainability as they relate to current models of university governance, and (b) analytical interpretations that critically assess how these insights align with or challenge theoretical propositions. This two-tiered approach ensures that the results are both contextually grounded and theoretically meaningful, providing a coherent pathway toward an autonomous and self-sustaining higher education system.

Key Principles of Sustainability and Institutional Autonomy in Existing Global University Governance Models

The Humboldtian Model: The Humboldtian model of higher education, which emerged in the early nineteenth century, is widely regarded as the first university model to systematically advance arguments in favor of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. A central principle of the model is the unity of teaching and research. Professors are simultaneously teachers and researchers, while students learn by participating in ongoing scholarly inquiry rather than simply absorbing transmitted knowledge. The seminar and laboratory became defining instructional formats, enabling students to engage directly in the production of knowledge (McNeely, 2002). This integration positioned the university as both a site of

"Bildung", the holistic cultivation of individuals, and a generator of new scientific knowledge (Kwiek, 2010).

A synthesis of the literature reveals several strengths and limitations. One major strength lies in the model's commitment to academic freedom, articulated in the twin concepts of "Lehrfreiheit" (freedom to teach) and "Lernfreiheit" (freedom to learn) (Bongaerts, 2022). These principles protected professors' autonomy in setting research agendas and pedagogical approaches, while allowing students to design their own learning pathways. The model was grounded in the conviction that the pursuit of truth thrives in environments free from political, ideological, or economic pressures. Humboldt therefore insisted that teachers be free to mount programs and conduct independent research, just as students should be free to choose their courses.

The model also elevated knowledge as an intrinsic good. Humboldt argued that "Wissenschaft", a comprehensive term covering both the sciences and the humanities, should be cultivated for its own sake rather than for immediate utilitarian purposes (Humboldt, 1810/2000). This reflected a humanistic ideal in which education fosters intellectual depth and moral character. Within this framework, the state may support universities but should refrain from dictating academic outcomes (Bongaerts, 2022).

The Humboldtian model laid the intellectual foundations of the modern research university, influencing institutions across Europe, the United States, and beyond in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Thelin, 2019). Its integration of research and teaching fostered original scholarship and inquiry-based learning, while academic freedom insulated universities from external pressures, creating conducive environments for scientific and intellectual advancement (McNeely, 2002; LERU, 2023).

Despite its enduring influence, the model has several limitations. Scholars argue that the "Humboldtian University" is partly idealized; even in nineteenth-century Germany, universities grappled with overcrowding, administrative constraints, and uneven application of academic freedom (Wilson Quarterly, n.d.; Morozov, 2016). The model's strong emphasis on professorial authority fostered hierarchical governance structures that often marginalized students and non-academic staff, raising concerns about elitism and inclusivity (Kwiek, 2010). Moreover, its anti-utilitarian orientation made the model less adaptable to demands for applied research and societal engagement during industrialization (Bongaerts, 2022). The model also proved insufficient in protecting universities from political influence, as demonstrated by the susceptibility of German institutions to nationalist and authoritarian control in the twentieth century (Turner, 2019).

The Napoleonic Model of the University: The Napoleonic model emerged in early nineteenth-century France during Napoleon Bonaparte's education reforms. It departed sharply from the Humboldtian tradition by placing higher education under centralized state authority and orienting universities towards professional training and national service. The reorganization of the University of Paris into the "Université Impériale" (1806–1808) exemplified this centralized approach (Charle & Verger, 1994; Rüegg, 2004). Under this system, universities functioned not as autonomous scholarly communities but as instruments of the state designed to serve political, administrative, and developmental goals.

The model offers notable strengths. First, it aligned universities closely with state priorities, ensuring that higher education contributed directly to economic development, public

administration, and national cohesion (Anderson, 2004). Second, it efficiently produced trained professionals—lawyers, engineers, doctors, and civil servants—who strengthened bureaucratic capacity (Ash, 2006). Third, the system fostered national identity in post-revolutionary France, with higher education serving as a mechanism for consolidating centralized authority (Charle & Verger, 1994).

However, the model also exhibits major limitations. Academic freedom was weakly protected, as professors, employed as civil servants, were subject to ministerial control, and curricula were tightly regulated (Rüegg, 2004). This left little room for independent or critical inquiry. The system also encouraged fragmentation: instead of comprehensive universities integrating multiple disciplines, it fostered numerous specialized schools narrowly focused on professional training (Anderson, 2004). Bureaucratic rigidity constrained innovation, as new research directions or academic programs often required state approval (Ash, 2006). These limitations reduced intellectual dynamism and hampered the evolution of universities into spaces of critical and scientific inquiry.

The Anglo-American Model of the University: The Anglo-American model, which evolved in the United Kingdom and the United States from the nineteenth century onward, represents a distinct trajectory characterized by mass participation, market responsiveness, and diversified funding. Shaped by liberal democratic and capitalist contexts, it blends teaching, research, and public service while maintaining strong linkages with society and the economy (Tight, 2009; Trow, 1973).

A key feature of the model is its commitment to mass higher education. Unlike the elitist Humboldtian system or the centralized Napoleonic model, the Anglo-American tradition expanded access significantly beginning in the nineteenth century. In the United States, the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 created public universities focused on agriculture, engineering, and applied sciences, simultaneously democratizing access and supporting regional development (Geiger, 2015). In the UK, the expansion of polytechnics and "new universities" from the mid-twentieth century facilitated greater social mobility (Tight, 2009).

Another hallmark is responsiveness to market forces. Universities adjust to student demand, labor market changes, and economic priorities through flexible curricula and increased emphasis on professional programs (Altbach et al., 2010). Institutions also compete for students, research funding, and philanthropic support, generating dynamism and fostering innovation (Scott, 1995).

Funding diversification is a further defining feature. Unlike strongly state-financed European models, Anglo-American universities draw revenue from multiple sources: tuition fees, endowments, philanthropic gifts, research grants, and commercialization of research (Geiger, 2004). This financial pluralism enhances resilience but also introduces vulnerabilities related to affordability and inequality.

The model's tripartite mission—teaching, research, and service, is complemented by growing entrepreneurial activities, including technology transfer and university–industry partnerships (Etzkowitz, 2003). As a result, Anglo-American universities are deeply embedded in knowledge economies and innovation ecosystems.

The model has notable strengths. Financial diversification enhances institutional sustainability; industry linkages accelerate innovation; and responsiveness to labour market needs ensures graduate competitiveness (Altbach et al., 2010). However, it also faces substantial critique. Commercialization risks reducing knowledge to a commodity rather than a public good (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Heavy reliance on tuition has contributed to rising student debt, especially in the US (Marginson, 2016). Inequality is pronounced, with elite institutions thriving while less-resourced universities struggle (Collini, 2012). Furthermore, market pressures may influence research agendas, potentially constraining academic freedom (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

The African Postcolonial University Model: The African postcolonial university model emerged during the independence era of the 1960s, as new nations sought universities that would advance national development and symbolize political sovereignty. Although many institutions were initially structured according to European traditions, British or French, they quickly developed distinctive characteristics shaped by local socioeconomic and political conditions (Ajayi et al., 1996; Teferra & Altbach, 2004).

A defining feature was the reliance on imported institutional blueprints. Anglophone African universities largely adopted British collegial structures, while Francophone institutions mirrored the centralized Napoleonic system (Yesufu, 1973). These transplanted models were seldom adapted meaningfully to local realities, often resulting in misalignments between inherited governance structures and national needs.

Another characteristic was heavy dependence on government funding and external donors. Newly independent states financed universities almost entirely from public budgets, viewing them as key nation-building institutions (Saint, 1992). Economic crises and structural adjustment policies in the 1980s, however, drastically reduced public investment, increasing dependence on external donors and creating long-term financial vulnerabilities (Samoff & Carroll, 2003).

Political interference has also been pervasive. Governments often influenced university leadership appointments, governance decisions, and institutional priorities, thereby undermining autonomy and academic freedom (Mamdani, 2007). Universities were frequently expected to serve ruling party agendas or support broader national ideologies.

Despite these challenges, African postcolonial universities contributed significantly to national development. They expanded access to higher education, democratizing learning opportunities for previously marginalized groups (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). They also produced the professionals, civil servants, and political leaders who shaped early post-independence development trajectories (Yesufu, 1973).

However, the model suffers from persistent structural limitations. Chronic underfunding, financial instability, and dependence on donors have undermined sustainability (Saint, 1992). Governance crises, marked by political interference, weak autonomy, and frequent conflicts between authorities and governments, remain widespread (Mamdani, 2007). Research output has been limited due to weak industry linkages and insufficient funding (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Many institutions face recurring strikes, poor working conditions, and brain drain as talented academics migrate in search of better opportunities (Samoff & Carroll, 2003).

Comparative Analysis of the University Models and Identified Gap: The comparative synthesis reveals several important patterns. First, the tension between academic autonomy and external control recurs across all models: the Humboldtian ideal of Lehrfreiheit and Lernfreiheit contrasts sharply with Napoleonic and state-driven approaches in Africa, while neoliberal universities face new market-driven constraints. Second, models differ in their orientation toward knowledge and utility: Humboldtian universities privileged knowledge for its own sake, while Napoleonic institutions tied knowledge to state agendas. In contrast, Anglo-American models linked it to market and Industry demands, and African postcolonial universities prioritized nation-building and social transformation. Third, all models address access and equity differently: Humboldtian and Napoleonic institutions were essentially elitist, while Anglo-American universities expanded access through massification, and African models emphasized inclusion.

Taken together, the gap across all the models lies in their inability to fully reconcile the triad of autonomy, equity, and relevance. Each model privileges one or two dimensions while neglecting the third. The Humboldtian model advances autonomy but neglects mass access and practical utility; the Napoleonic model prioritizes state-directed relevance but constrains autonomy and critical inquiry; the Anglo-American and neoliberal models achieve responsiveness and competitiveness but exacerbate inequities and risk commodifying knowledge; and the African postcolonial model champions nation-building and access but struggles with autonomy and sustainability. None has successfully integrated academic freedom, equitable access, and societal relevance in a balanced and sustainable manner.

This synthesis suggests that the contemporary challenge for higher education lies in forging a hybrid or transformative model that transcends the limitations of past frameworks. Such a model should preserve academic freedom, guarantee equitable access, and ensure sustainable funding, and link universities meaningfully to societal and global challenges without succumbing to excessive state or market domination.

Challenges in Relation to Governance, Funding, and Autonomy within African Universities

Governance and Institutional Autonomy

Analysis of the empirical literature and a review of relevant documents have revealed significant challenges regarding governance in higher education institutions in Africa. The analysis suggests a consistent pattern across national and institutional documents in which authority is centralized in externally appointed councils, leaving limited room for internal participatory governance. The frequent use of directive language ('shall,' 'must,' 'subject to approval') in Statutes and Acts of the universities further reflects a bureaucratic tone that disempowers internal actors. Academic staff are constructed not as stakeholders, but as subjects of control, legitimizing a hierarchical model of governance. For instance, the governance framework of S. D. Dombo University in Ghana, as enshrined in Act 1001 and the University's Statutes, reveals a highly centralized administrative structure. Power is principally constructed around the University Council, which is legally mandated to perform broad governance and oversight functions. Under Section 12(1) of Act 1001, the Council is granted the authority to "do or provide for any matter in relation to the University which the Council considers necessary or expedient." This provision establishes a legal basis for the exercise of extensive discretionary powers. Moreover, Section 6 affirms the Council's role in determining the

strategic direction of the university, controlling finances, and making professorial appointments on the recommendation of the Academic Board.

The centralization of power within the higher education system has significant implications for institutional autonomy, participatory governance, and academic freedom. Provisions in the Statutes of the various universities further compound this. Faculties and departments have limited control over key functions, such as student admissions and staff appointments. For example, University for Development Studies Statute 62.1 places admissions under a centrally composed board, marginalizing departmental input. At the S. D. Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies, departmental initiatives must align with the Vice-Chancellor's performance targets, restricting local innovation and reflecting a broader trend of managerialist control. Though some documents suggest shared governance, decision-making remains dominated by executive officers, reducing genuine academic participation.

Outside the university, the continued interference of external stakeholders continues to jeopardize institutional autonomy and Academic Freedom. Governments often determine budgets, approve key appointments, and influence curriculum design, thereby constraining the independence of academic institutions. In Ethiopia, Teshome and Kebede (2010) report that the government maintains strict oversight of public universities through the Ministry of Education, limiting their capacity to make independent financial and academic decisions. In Zimbabwe, the 2006 University Amendment Act empowered the President to appoint Vice-Chancellors and Council Members, effectively eroding institutional autonomy (Muzondidya, 2010).

Instances of censorship, intimidation, and governance reprisals against critical decisions of universities have also been documented in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Egypt, and Sudan. In Nigeria, for instance, Olayo (2019) reports that political interference in the appointment and dismissal of Vice Chancellors has generated prolonged conflicts and leadership instability in several universities, including the University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University.

Funding Challenges

The results of the analysis suggest that funding challenges in African Higher Education institutions are both historical and structural. Since attaining self-governance, most African universities have relied heavily on state subsidies, which have become increasingly inadequate due to fiscal constraints and competing national priorities. In most cases, state authorities exploit the overreliance on academic freedom and institutional autonomy. A recent example that illustrates this tension is the 2025 dispute between the University of Cape Coast (UCC) and the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), where GTEC threatened to block all subventions to the university for failing to comply with its directives. When regulatory bodies like GTEC use funding as a tool of control, universities are pressured to compromise their principles and internal governance processes to maintain operational viability. Such pressures also risk diminishing a university's credibility, both domestically and internationally, thereby affecting student enrollment, faculty retention, research collaboration, and graduate recognition.

The ever-increasing demand for higher education, driven by population growth and increased access needs, has further exacerbated resource shortages, resulting in overcrowded lecture halls, deteriorating infrastructure, and a decline in educational quality. Mamdani (2007) reports that in Uganda and Tanzania, enrollments have surged without commensurate investment in

facilities or academic staff development, straining institutional capacities. In Ghana, Atuahene (2011) reports that the introduction of fee-paying schemes and the Ghana Tertiary Education Trust Fund (GETFUND) has improved funding marginally. However, disparities persist between public and private universities. In South Africa, Booysen (2016) reveals that despite relatively stronger funding mechanisms, public universities continue to face protests over tuition affordability, as witnessed in the "Fees Must Fall Movement, 2015-2016. Furthermore, donor dependency remains high with international agencies such as the World Bank and UNESCO exerting influence over national higher education policies, often prioritizing efficiency and market responsiveness over social equity and institutional autonomy.

The Proposed Model of Self-Sustaining and Autonomous Higher Education System

Drawing on insights from an extensive literature review and analysis of relevant documents, the study proposes a model for a higher education system in Africa. A model that is financially self-sustaining and institutionally autonomous. Rooted in local realities and aligned with international standards, the study envisages a university that is financially independent, academically autonomous, socially relevant, and globally competitive. The fundamental pillars of the proposed model include governance and autonomy, financial sustainability, academic freedom and knowledge production, teaching and learning transformation, innovation and enterprise, community and societal engagement, sustainability and resilience, accountability, and Quality Assurance. The model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A model of Self-Sustaining and Autonomous Higher Education System
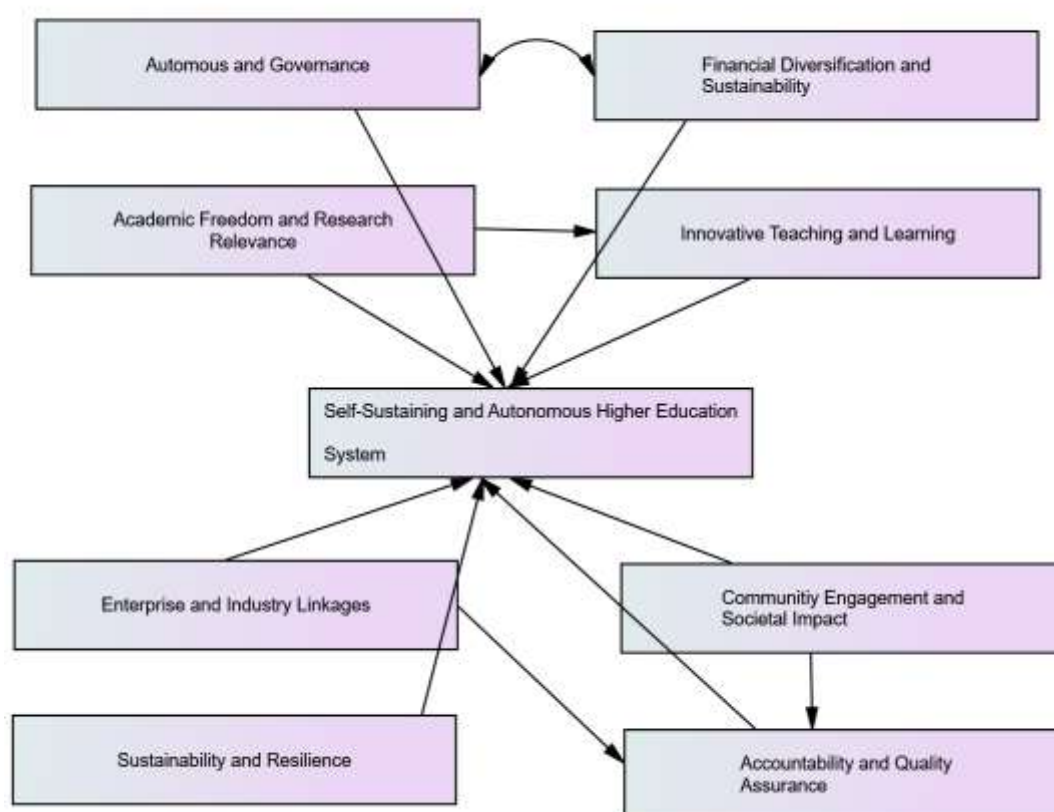
Governance & Autonomy

The study proposes a more autonomous higher education system in Africa characterized by shared governance, decentralized institutional structures, and insulation from political interference, balanced with robust accountability mechanisms. These principles are fundamental to promoting institutional efficiency, academic freedom, and innovation within universities across the continent.

Shared governance involves the inclusion of diverse university stakeholders, including councils, faculty, administrative staff, students, and alums, in key decision-making processes. This model recognizes the university as a collegial community rather than a bureaucratic hierarchy. Shared governance promotes transparency, inclusivity, and collective responsibility, which are crucial for fostering trust and commitment among stakeholders. Implementing shared governance ensures that academic and administrative decisions reflect a broader range of perspectives, thereby enhancing institutional legitimacy and responsiveness. Furthermore, research indicates that universities that practice shared governance are more resilient to crises, more innovative, and better aligned with their academic missions (Altbach, 2011; Aseka, 2019).

Decentralization involves delegating administrative and financial authority to faculties, schools, and departments, allowing them to manage resources, initiate innovations, and respond swiftly to emerging challenges. This structural reform promotes flexibility and context-based decision-making, thereby enhancing efficiency and accountability at the unit level. Decentralized structures empower academic units to make timely decisions about curriculum, staffing, and resource allocation, enhancing both productivity and responsiveness to local and global demands (Saint, 2009). Decentralization also supports leadership development at multiple levels of the institution, promoting a culture of initiative and self-governance rather than dependency on central authorities.

A key element of university autonomy is insulation from political manipulation and undue governmental control. State institutions should therefore enact enabling legislation to safeguard the independence of university governance. This includes ensuring that the appointment of governing councils and key administrators is transparent, merit-based, and minimally influenced by partisan politics. When universities are shielded from direct political influence, they can focus on their core missions of teaching, research, and community service. Moreover, autonomy is positively correlated with institutional performance and global competitiveness (Salmi, 2009).

Even though autonomy and insulation from politics are essential, they must be complemented by clear accountability frameworks to ensure transparency and public trust. Universities should be accountable to their stakeholders, including students, staff, and the broader society, through mechanisms such as performance audits, academic peer reviews, and transparent financial reporting—autonomy without accountability risks mismanagement and corruption. Establishing internal and external accountability systems ensures that universities uphold high standards of governance, ethics, and performance (Materu, 2007).

Reforming Regulatory Governance in Ghana: The Case of the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC): Using the Ghanaian system as a case, the study argues that state authorities should repeal the existing legislation establishing the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) to reduce excessive governmental control over tertiary education institutions. Under the current framework, the President of the Republic appoints the Director-General, Deputy Director-General, and all members of the Commission, thereby concentrating regulatory power in the Executive branch. Specific clauses in the GTEC Act further empower the Commission to issue directives and enforce compliance directly. This arrangement undermines institutional autonomy and opens the door to political interference in the governance of higher education.

The direct appointment of all GTEC officials by the President politicizes the Commission and compromises its neutrality. In principle, a regulatory body should operate as an impartial arbiter, ensuring standards, accountability, and quality assurance across universities. However, in practice, the heavy executive influence allows successive governments to use GTEC as an instrument of control rather than an independent oversight body.

Empirical evidence across Africa indicates that when political executives dominate higher education regulatory structures, universities frequently experience disruptions in governance, restrictions on academic freedom, and inconsistent policy direction (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996; Teferra, 2014). The Ghanaian experience reflects this broader continental trend, where political authority overrides academic judgment, particularly in appointment and funding decisions.

In place of the repealed GTEC Act, the study proposes that universities and other tertiary institutions in Ghana should constitute themselves into cooperatives or consortia, empowered to elect their own leaders and develop standards and enforcement procedures for self-regulation. Such a model would encourage peer accountability rather than political oversight. The government's role would then be limited to providing broad policy direction and allocating funding, without direct involvement in the appointments or operational decisions of the regulatory authority. This model aligns with international best practices, where higher education regulatory frameworks operate independently of executive control. For instance, in countries such as the United Kingdom and South Africa, independent quality assurance bodies, like the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE), derive legitimacy from professional and academic expertise rather than political appointment. A cooperative self-regulatory structure fosters professionalism, transparency, and credibility within the tertiary education system while maintaining accountability through peer evaluation and public reporting mechanisms (Saint, 2009; Cloete et al., 2015).

Without a repeal of the legal framework, any claim to university autonomy in Ghana remains nominal. Genuine autonomy must be grounded in law, ensuring that regulatory bodies function in the public interest, not as instruments of executive control. This approach would restore confidence in the higher education system, align Ghana with international standards, and empower universities to fulfill their transformative role in national and regional development.

Financial Sustainability

Another significant pillar of the model of an autonomous and self-sustaining higher education system is financial sustainability. The sustainability and independence of universities depend not only on institutional governance but also on their ability to mobilize and manage financial

resources independently of state control. Without financial autonomy, academic freedom and institutional independence remain nominal, as universities continue to rely on government subventions that are often unpredictable and politically influenced.

True academic freedom is inseparable from financial independence. When a university's survival depends entirely on government allocations, it becomes vulnerable to political interference, bureaucratic delays, and shifting policy priorities. Financially autonomous universities, on the other hand, can set long-term academic and research agendas aligned with national and global needs, free from undue external pressure. As noted by Salmi (2009) and Saint (2009), institutions that control their own finances demonstrate stronger governance, accountability, and innovation capacity. Dependence on government funding undermines the principle of autonomy, as political actors can influence or even dictate institutional priorities through conditional grants and budgetary approvals.

To achieve genuine financial autonomy, universities must develop diversified and sustainable revenue streams that reduce reliance on government subsidies. These can include endowment funds and alumni contributions, which provide long-term investment income and foster stakeholder ownership; public–private partnerships (PPPs) for infrastructure, research, and innovation; commercialization of intellectual property, such as patents, innovations, and publications; consultancy and professional services offered by academic departments; executive education, short courses, and certification programs targeting professionals and industry partners; and agricultural, industrial, and digital enterprises, especially in universities with comparative advantages in applied sciences, technology, and entrepreneurship.

These revenue diversification mechanisms have been successfully implemented by universities in both developed and developing contexts. For instance, the University of Cape Town and Makerere University have introduced executive education programs and consultancy arms to supplement declining state funding. Endowment-driven models in the United States, such as Harvard and Stanford, illustrate how investment income can secure long-term institutional sustainability. Diversification also buffers universities from macroeconomic shocks and political instability, enabling consistent academic performance and infrastructural development (Cloete et al., 2015; Materu, 2007)

Universities should be encouraged to establish commercial and productive enterprises that align with their academic expertise and regional economic potential—such as agricultural projects, small-scale manufacturing, and digital technology ventures. Such enterprises serve both as revenue sources and experiential learning environments for students. The creation of university-owned enterprises links research, innovation, and entrepreneurship with financial sustainability. Successful examples include Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (Kenya), which operates agro-industrial ventures, and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which runs commercial farms and consultancies. These ventures not only enhance financial independence but also strengthen university–industry linkages and contribute to local economic development (Ng'ethe, Subotzky & Afeti, 2008).

In Ghana, the current arrangement whereby the government pays the salaries of university staff while students pay only Academic Facility User Fees (AFUF) is unsustainable and counterproductive to institutional autonomy. Under this system, universities heavily depend on state subsidies, which the government can withhold or delay as a means of control. The study proposes a restructured funding model that allows universities to charge both academic

facilities and tuition fees. At the same time, the government redirects its role towards student support rather than institutional control.

This approach balances equity with autonomy. By allowing universities to charge tuition, they gain a predictable revenue base to finance operations, salaries, and infrastructure. The government, in turn, can ensure access through targeted scholarships and bursaries for students who are needy, economically disadvantaged, and socially marginalized. This student-centered funding approach has proven effective in South Africa and Kenya, where National Student Financial Aid Schemes and higher education loan boards enable cost-sharing without undermining institutional independence.

In this reimagined model, the government's role shifts from that of a regulator and paymaster to that of a client or customer, procuring educational services for its citizens. The state invests in higher education indirectly by sponsoring students, funding research projects of national interest, and providing competitive grants—rather than dictating institutional operations. Such a model aligns with the "market–client approach" adopted in parts of Asia and Latin America, where governments purchase outputs (such as graduates, research, and innovation) instead of controlling inputs (such as budgets and appointments). It enhances institutional accountability through performance contracts rather than political oversight (World Bank, 2010). When universities can pay staff from internally generated funds, they are no longer subject to fiscal manipulation, allowing them to operate with the academic freedom and managerial discretion required for world-class performance.

Financial autonomy, however, must be accompanied by robust internal accountability frameworks. Transparent financial management, periodic audits, and regular stakeholder reporting are essential to ensure that resources are utilized efficiently and in alignment with institutional priorities. Autonomy without accountability can lead to corruption and inefficiency. Therefore, financial independence should be accompanied by rigorous internal and external quality assurance and financial oversight mechanisms (Materu, 2007).

Academic Freedom & Knowledge Production

The third pillar of an autonomous and self-sustaining higher education system is academic freedom and the production of knowledge. Academic freedom lies at the heart of the university's mission and is essential for advancing knowledge, innovation, and social progress. Without freedom of thought, expression, teaching, and research, universities cannot fulfill their role as independent centers of inquiry and critique.

Academic freedom refers to the right of scholars and institutions to pursue truth, generate and disseminate knowledge, and express ideas without interference or fear of reprisal. It encompasses freedom in teaching, research, publication, and institutional governance, as articulated in the UNESCO (1997) recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel. Academic freedom is not a privilege but a professional necessity, ensuring that intellectual work is guided by evidence, ethics, and the pursuit of truth rather than political or ideological control.

State authorities must enact and enforce enabling legal frameworks that protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This involves explicit legislative guarantees for freedom of teaching, research, publication, and academic association, coupled with mechanisms for redress when these rights are violated. The laws establishing universities and regulatory bodies

should explicitly prohibit government or political interference in academic matters, curriculum design, and research direction. In many African countries, including Ghana, higher education laws provide limited or vague protections for academic freedom, allowing governments to exert indirect control through appointments, funding, or accreditation processes. Establishing explicit legal guarantees strengthens institutional autonomy and reassures faculty and researchers that they can engage in critical inquiry without fear of political or administrative sanctions.

While universities must be globally engaged, their research priorities should be grounded in local realities and aligned with national and continental development needs. In the African context, higher education institutions should prioritize knowledge production that addresses pressing challenges in agriculture, health, climate change, governance, and technology. Such a focus situates research as a driver of socio-economic transformation rather than an abstract academic exercise. The continent continues to face persistent structural challenges, such as food insecurity, public health crises, environmental degradation, and technological dependency that require contextually relevant scientific and social research. As Saint (2009) and Cloete et al. (2015) observe, universities in Africa can only achieve legitimacy and sustainable funding when their outputs demonstrably contribute to development outcomes. Aligning research with local priorities also supports national policy innovation and enhances the societal impact of universities.

While prioritizing local relevance, universities must also engage in global academic networks and collaborations to enhance their global reach. Partnerships with international institutions, research consortia, and funding bodies enable the cross-fertilization of ideas, exposure to global best practices, and benchmarking of standards. They also enhance institutional visibility, attract external funding, and increase the competitiveness of African universities in the global knowledge economy. Global collaboration does not negate autonomy; rather, it strengthens it by diversifying intellectual inputs and reducing dependence on domestic political systems. Collaborations, such as the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), and partnerships under the European Union's Horizon programs, illustrate how African universities can expand their research frontiers while addressing continental issues through international cooperation. Furthermore, such networks facilitate joint publications, staff exchange, and co-supervision of postgraduate research, enriching both capacity and credibility (Teferra, 2014).

Academic freedom must coexist with academic responsibility—the obligation of scholars to uphold integrity, objectivity, and accountability in their teaching and research. Freedom of expression within the university should never be used to justify misinformation, plagiarism, or the politicization of scholarship. Institutions must develop clear ethical standards and peer review systems to ensure that the pursuit of knowledge is both free and responsible. Autonomy without responsibility risks academic indiscipline and a decline in standards. The responsible exercise of freedom enhances the university's credibility and fosters public trust in its outputs. As Altbach (2011) notes, academic freedom thrives best within cultures of self-regulation, ethical professionalism, and intellectual honesty.

Teaching & Learning Transformation

Teaching and learning transformation is the fourth pillar of the autonomous and self-sustaining higher education system. Higher education institutions should implement a flexible curriculum by blending liberal education with technical/professional training. Technology should also be

utilized to enhance teaching and learning through online/hybrid learning, thereby expanding reach and reducing costs. Teaching and learning should also focus on skills and innovation, integrating entrepreneurship, leadership, and community problem-solving into every program. Inclusive education must also be emphasized—providing equitable access regardless of socio-economic background, along with scholarship schemes.

Innovation & Enterprise

The fifth pillar is innovation and enterprise. Universities should be seen as hubs for innovation, characterized by research parks, incubators, and accelerators that nurture start-ups. The university must also establish linkages with Industry by co-designing curricula and undertaking joint research and internships. In terms of knowledge economy contributions, universities must be viewed as engines of job creation, not just job seekers. This will make the higher education institutions relevant.

Community & Societal Engagement

The sixth pillar of the model is community and societal engagement. Universities are hubs for local economic and social development. The universities must therefore commit to community-based research & service, addressing real local needs (e.g., food security, health care, education). Through social contracts with society, universities should be accountable not only to the state but also to communities and civil society.

Sustainability & Resilience

The university system must be resilient and sustainable. Institutions must prioritize the adoption of renewable energy, sustainable campuses, and eco-friendly practices. They must also commit to integrating ICT in administration, teaching, research, and resource mobilization. For crisis preparedness, resilient structures are necessary to mitigate political, economic, and health shocks (e.g., pandemics).

Accountability & Quality Assurance

The last pillar of the model is accountability and quality assurance. There must be independent quality assurance units that will ensure continuous improvement. There should also be transparent institutional audit reporting. An annual "university sustainability and autonomy report" should also be made public.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to propose a model of a self-sustaining and autonomous higher education system. It therefore presents a model for a self-sustaining and autonomous higher education system in Africa, emphasizing institutional autonomy, financial independence, and academic freedom. Rooted in local realities and aligned with global standards, it advances governance reform, innovation, accountability, and societal engagement as foundations for resilient, competitive, and development-oriented universities in Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that State Authorities and higher education institutions should strengthen autonomy, diversify funding, and promote innovation to ensure sustainable and globally competitive higher education.

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