

Influence of University Council Heterogeneity and Proprietor Concentration on Autonomy of Higher Education Governance in Malawi

Dennis John Rabson Matekenya
ADRA Malawi
dennis.matekenya@adra.org.mw

Sharon Weaver Pittman
Malawi Adventist University
pittmans@mau.adventist.org

Abstract: Adventist University Boards are highly populated by church leaders. This challenge raises concerns about the University Councils' autonomy which is the major underpinning objective of this research. The study used Survey Monkey® to collect data. Regression analysis found that any unit increase in council size, gender diversity, age of council members, and role duality reduced the perceptions of autonomy of the university council and their coefficients were not significant. While the concentration of stakeholders and church leaders and increased tenure of members on the board have a positive contribution to the autonomy of the university council, their contribution also was not significant. This study found composition, ethnicity, and independents as strong predictors of Council autonomy. The regression model shows independent variables contributing 30% variability of council autonomy. Researchers recommend reducing church leaders and increasing professionals on the University Council to enhance the autonomy of the council.

Keywords: *Council autonomy, council composition, independent professionals, church leaders' concentration, board composition, governance structure.*

Introduction

Malawi has experienced the mushrooming of higher education institutions challenging the traditional monopoly of the University of Malawi in providing higher education. While corporate governance studies have focused on private for-profit entities and state-owned enterprises, few studies have been done to establish the optimal governance autonomy of faith-based, sectarian universities within the African context.

A comparative study was done in Ghana on the governance arrangements of public and private universities (Tetteh, 2007). The study only focused on three variables: size, composition, and function of University Councils. However, the study did not examine the complexities of prevailing governance theories as they relate to faith-based universities. Therefore, this study will focus on the governance arrangements of faith-based universities in Malawi and their unique commitments concerning agency theory

and stewardship theory of corporate governance.

Autonomy is the major determinant for the effectiveness of institutional governance (Grossi and Reichard, 2008). It is important for institutions of higher education to have autonomous governance structures that prevent interference and overreach of unwanted or biased influences. Governance autonomy increases the efficiency of the organisation. Krause and Van Thiel (2019) and Voorn et al. (2017a) argue for the importance of autonomy in the effective management of organisations. As such, autonomy is considered a key predictor of quality performance for colleges and universities, according to Voorn et al. (2017a).

Governance autonomy keeps politicians in check from meddling in service delivery since politicians may have incentives to sacrifice efficiency for the sake of elected positions. Carvalho and Diogo (2018) analyzed the relationship between institutional and academic autonomy and argued that initiatives to improve

institutional autonomy eventually led to increased professional autonomy of scientists. Zelenska et al. (2021) have confirmed that to develop the quality of university management and educational services, universities need genuine university autonomy, which should be strong enough to prevent errors and inadequacies experienced in the past.

The purpose of this research was to find out if there is a relationship between the composition and institutional autonomy of faith-based universities. This study, therefore, sought to explore the relationship between the elements in the composition of the faith-based university councils like council structure, proprietor concentration, professionals in the council, council diversity, and longevity of council members that may impact the autonomy of these councils.

Literature Review

In higher education, corporate governance is expressed in processes taken at all levels of the academic structure from the university council to departmental committees. Coaldrake et al. (2003) suggest that corporate governance is concerned with the roles of governing bodies of universities which are believed to be important for the effective performance of academic systems.

Morrill (2010) observes that while academic leaders at all levels need to understand the criteria of ethical legitimacy embodied in shared governance, they also need to acknowledge the limits of shared leadership processes. When pressures for change begin to mount, the fuzziness of shared leadership becomes visible, and the conflicts in values emerge, academic programs and processes are at stake. Mitchell and King (2018) assert that good academic governance presumes a commitment to know more about what you do not know, even when you do not know that you do not know it.

The composition of any corporate board is seen through the structure of the council, the number of council members, and the distribution of independent professionals, management, and shareholders. Hechinger, Bobowick, and Heard (2008) suggest that good governance practices lead organisations to set the size and composition of the board, not arbitrarily but thoughtfully

and intentionally. They say organisations can benefit significantly from having views of key communities, key constituencies, and key funders/donors on their boards. These board members bring important views and often unique perspectives to board discussions. When boards do so, they consider the organisation's current and future opportunities and challenges, and they balance the need for inclusion of desired skills, experience, and access with a recognition of the impact of additional directors on the quality of board discussions and the commitment of individual board members (Hechinger, Bobowick and Heard, 2008).

Boards are composed intentionally to fulfill the aspirations of the shareholders. Two fundamental theories govern how boards are structured or constituted. The first one is the agency theory which proffers those managers cannot be trusted to run the affairs of the entity in the best interest of the shareholders (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Therefore, states the theory, shareholder involvement or independent directors can supervise management in the interest of the shareholders.

Shareholder concentration is governance by which shareholders can influence their managers more directly to protect their interests (Maug, 1998). When the shareholder power is widely distributed, no single owner may have enough power to influence the board's constitution, making the board's role even more critical in supervising management. Based on agency theory, studies on board effectiveness have primarily focused on board independence as a measure of board effectiveness and firm performance (Dalton et al., 1998; Daily et al., 2003).

In another study, Fan and Wong (2002) reported that ownership concentration is related to low earnings quality, and Yunos et al. (2010) found that ownership concentration is associated with lower accounting conservatism. Abdullah and Nasir (2004) provide evidence that in the context of Malaysia, board independence is not significantly related to earnings management due to the high ownership concentration in Malaysian companies.

The diversity of board structure may be viewed in terms of board demography, board members' personal attributes, and board

members' interpersonal cohesion. Researchers generally agree that board demographic configuration should include age, gender, race or ethnicity, and educational background (Carpenter et al., 2004; Joshi et al., 2011). As the diversity of perspective is seen as a valuable addition to a board's deliberations, boards should have a diversity policy that has measurable objectives for achieving diversity, including diversity of gender, age, ethnicity, and life's experiences (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2013).

The literature suggests that gender diversity on the board tends to affect the board dynamics, decision-making, and cognitive processes, which also affect the board outcomes. For example, although gender does not affect an organisation's profitability, there appears to be evidence to the effect that gender diversity does impact board dynamics (Terjesen, Searly, and Singh, 2009). However, Bohren and Strom (2010) observe that evidence of the impact of board gender diversity is weak, with studies finding positive and negative and sometimes no relationship between board gender diversity and organisational profitability.

Available literature further suggests that there is a threshold for female participation for optimal board outcomes, as opposed to having female representation by percentage. Post, Rahman, and Rubow (2011) recommend that three women thresholds on the board make a qualitative difference, especially with corporate social responsibility. A positive relationship was found between the percentage of females on board of directors and firm performance (Erhardt et al., 2003; Carter et al., 2010).

Further, in their study, Oxelheim and Randoy (2003) affirmed that second and third-culture directors are associated with high-value Scandinavian ventures. However, Carter et al. (2010) have not found definitive evidence that ethnically diverse boards deliver financially successful firms in the United States of America. It may be concluded that board demographic diversity will affect board dynamics by creating conflicts on the board (Goodstein et al., 1994) or creating opportunities for generating different perspectives (Farrel and Hersch, 2005), or becoming instrumental in leveraging a wider resource base (Arfken et al., 2004). Depending on the situation, board diversity may facilitate better

outcomes, limit the performance of organisations or create a balance of views and perspectives (Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003).

Board members who attend other boards more frequently tend to build organisation-specific competencies and enhance a significant rapporteur of relationships across the industry. According to Hillman et al. (2011), shareholders are wary of independent directors who have longer tenure due to the autonomy and control they develop over time. Kosnik (1990) found a relationship between the level of board tenure and the level of resistance to corporate raiders or hostile takeovers. However, Johnson, Schnatterly, and Hill (2013) conclude that collective personal attributes on the board affect board activities' strategic trajectory because board tenure, expertise, and experiences impact their cognitive abilities and decision-making processes.

According to studies, age plays a critical role in the board members' ability to initiate and embrace the strategic change of an organisation they serve. Wiersema and Bantel (1992) have observed that older board members are less likely to initiate change, while Ahn and Walker (2007) concluded that younger board members are associated with greater strategic change.

In another study, Golden and Zajac (2001) observed that the percentage of board members who were 50 years or older was positively associated with organisational strategic change, while Platt and Platt (2012) found that organizations that succumbed to bankruptcy had younger board members. This appears to indicate that while younger board members like to be change agents, older board members tend to be safer pairs of hands for the organization's stability. Platt and Platt (2012) conclude that age determines experience and risk perception.

Theoretical Framework

The agency theory of corporate governance says that managers, left to themselves, will not act to maximise the returns to shareholders unless appropriate governance structures are implemented in the large corporation to safeguard the interests of shareholders (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Agency theory argues that in the modern corporation, where share ownership is widely held, managerial actions depart from

those required to maximise shareholder returns (Pratt & Zeckhauser, 1985). The agency theory may clarify the proprietor’s concentration on the university council.

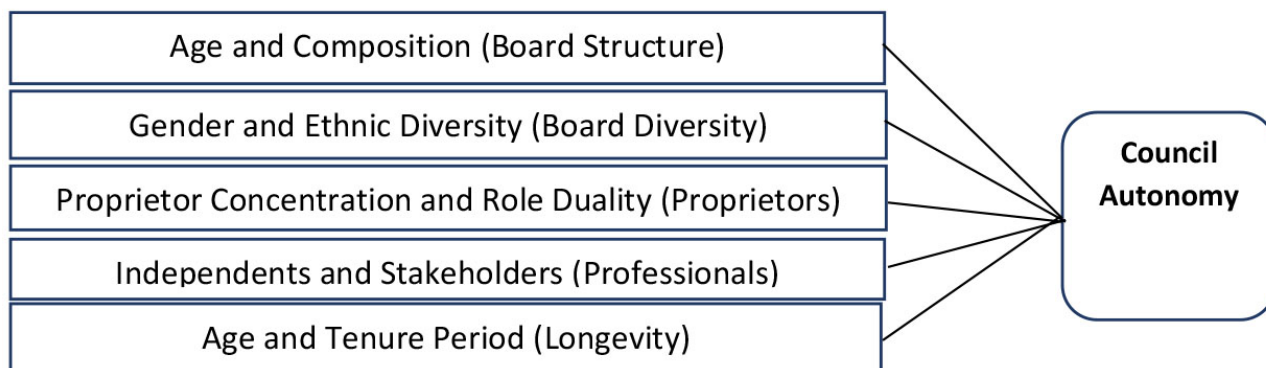
However, critics of agency theory argue that this theory assumes that people are self-interested, not altruistic. Tricker (2015) says the theory holds that people cannot be expected to look after the interests of others. Thus directors or agents cannot be trusted.

The stewardship theory of corporate governance stipulates that since managers can be trusted to act in the best interest of their shareholders, it is important to create management structures that facilitate autonomous decision-making that enables companies to respond quickly and decisively to emerging opportunities (Calder, 2008). Flynn (2018) defined a steward as someone who protects and takes care of the needs of others. Under the stewardship theory, company executives defend the interests of the owners or shareholders and make decisions on their behalf. Their sole objective is creating and maintaining a successful organisation, so the shareholders prosper.

Tricker (2015) reports that shareholding members of the company nominate and appoint directors, who then act as stewards for their interests. The directors report to them on the results of that stewardship, subject to a report from an independent auditor that the accounts show is a true and fair view. He further says that ownership is the basis of power over the corporation.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Research Questions

The overall objective of this research is to discover the relationship between the composition and the level of autonomy of the faith-based university councils in Malawi. This research sought to establish if the composition of the university council significantly affects the autonomy of the council in decision-making. To achieve the objective of this research, the research was being guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent do the council size and diversity relate to the autonomy of the university council?
2. Is there a relationship between the composition, tenure, and age of council members and the council’s autonomy?
3. How does the degree of church leaders’ concentration, independent professionals, and stakeholder concentration affect the autonomy of the university councils?

Methodology

The methodology section covers the research design, sampling procedure, data collection, and research instruments. It also presents statistical tools to analyze data and ethical considerations that directed the researchers during the study.

Research Design

The research design selected by the researcher is called the quantitative research method (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative research method is the preferred research design because it allows the interpretation of numerical data that will be collected to understand the degree of deviation from the hypothesis and measure the degree of correlation between the variables.

Target Population

According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), given a known population of 400 council members, the estimated sample size is 196. In this study, there were a total of 119 universities with an average of 18 members per University Council, which provides 2,142 as the population for this study. The estimated sample size of 325 was considered appropriate for this study. The Krejcie and Morgan Sample Size formula is: $n = \frac{[z^2 * p * (1 - p) / e^2]}{[1 + (z^2 * p * (1 - p) / (e^2 * N))]}$ where n is the sample size; z is the z-score associated with a level of confidence; p is the sample proportion, expressed as a decimal; e is the margin of error, expressed as a decimal and N is the population size.

Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling of the respondents was done by listing and coding faith-based universities in Africa. The numbers had responding numbers that were placed in a bowl. Then they were randomly picked to give equal chances to all universities to participate in the study. Once the universities were selected, the Survey Monkey® link was sent to the Vice-Chancellor of each university. They, in turn, were requested to share the link with their council members to encourage their voluntary participation in the study.

Data Analysis

The data was encoded in the SPSS software for analysis. After cleaning the data, various statistics were used to answer the research questions. Descriptive statistics were used for the first research questions. Multiple regression was used to answer the second and third research questions. The latter is deemed appropriate to estimate the causal relationships between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables.

Results

The demographic data shows that out of the respondents ($N=130$), 69% were male ($n=90$), while 29% were female respondents ($n=37$). Several respondents ($n=3$) did not indicate their gender. The descriptive data also suggests that, not surprisingly, most had master's degrees

($n=55$) and nearly the same amount had doctoral degrees ($n=50$), and a few had post-doctoral ($n=12$) qualifications. Only a few had bachelor's degrees ($n=11$), and only a couple ($n=2$) did not indicate their educational attainments.

The results show that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy shows a score of .792, indicating an adequate sample size, and the p -value is $<.001$, which is statistically significant. The reliability test shows the Cronbach's alpha score of .829, which indicates that the instrument is reliable with items internally consistent. All independent variables had a linear relationship with the dependent variables. These parameters show that we could proceed with regression analysis.

In testing assumptions for running multi-regression, descriptive statistics indicate that all variables demonstrate equality of the mean as they are all within 1.707 and 2.595, while the standard error of the mean also shows equality ranging from .0425 to .0567. The data distribution reveals that the spread is within a range of .485 to .779. This indicates that data is evenly distributed, rendering it suitable for further regression analysis.

The correlations (see Table 1) show a positive Pearson's correlation of .415 between council autonomy and the way the council is constituted, and the p -value is $<.001$, which is statistically significant. The correlation between council autonomy and ethnic diversity of the council is also positive at .385 with a p -value of $<.001$ and is statistically significant. The correlation between council autonomy and concentration of independent professional members of the council is .380 with a p -value of $<.001$ and is statistically significant, while the correlations of concentration of stakeholders and the period of council tenure have the values of .336 and .248, respectively. The p -value for stakeholders is $<.001$ while the p -value for tenure is .04; both are statistically significant.

Table 1

Correlations and Autonomy

The model summary (see also Table 2) shows that 30% of the variability of autonomy can be explained by independent variables church leaders, ethnocentric, stakeholders, ages, tenure,

		Composition	Ethnocentric	Independent	Stakeholder	Tenure
Councilautonomy	Pearson Correlation	.415**	.385**	.380**	.336**	.248**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.004
		Size	Church Leaders	Ages	Genders	Dual roles
Councilautonomy	Pearson Correlation	.185*	.173*	.149	.118	.104
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.035	.049	.091	.183	.238

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). N= 130

Church leaders' concentration has a weak correlation of .173 although the p-value is .05 and is significant. The correlations of average age of council members, gender diversity of the council and role duality of church leaders have weak correlations of .15, .12 and .10 while their p-values are >.05 showing that they are not significant predictors for the autonomy of the university council.

The ANOVA's (see Table 2) showed that our model summary is statistically significant (p <

.05, F = 5.071). These findings suggest that we can trust the model summary with the variables that have been used in the model. Multiple linear regression was calculated to predict perceptions about council autonomy based on council size, council composition, role duality, gender diversity, ethnic diversity, independent members, tenure period, Church Leader's concentration, stakeholders and average age of the council members. A significant regression equation was observed (F=5.07, p < .05), (10,119) with an R² .30.

Table 2

Coefficients, ANNOVA and Model Summary

	B Statistic	Beta	T	Sig.	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared	df	F Change	Sig. F Change
(Constant)	.744		3.341	.001	.299	.240	10, 119	5.071	.000
Size	-.023	-.031	-2.290	.772					
Composition	.225	.229	2.260	.026					
Role Duality	-.078	-.125	-1.148	.253					
Genders	-.131	-.170	-1.731	.086					
Ethnocentric	.170	.216	2.185	.031					
Independent	.200	.242	2.124	.036					
Stakeholder	.094	.125	1.216	.226					
Tenure	.087	.098	1.032	.304					
Ages	-.005	-.006	-.060	.953					
Church Leaders	.009	.012	.114	.909					

composition, genders, role duality, size, independent professionals while the ANOVA tables demonstrate that the model is statistically significant ($p < .05$, $F = 5.071$).

The coefficient Table 2 above indicates that the standardized coefficients of the Betas for council size is $-.031$ with a p -value of $>.77$. This shows that with every unit increase in the size of the university council, its autonomy reduces by $.031$, and the predictive power of council size on the university council autonomy is not significant. The table also reveals that role duality has a negative impact on the autonomy of the university council. There is a reduction of $.125$ with every incidence of church leaders taking leading roles in the functions of the university council.

It can also be observed from the coefficients in Table 2 that gender considerations are not positive contributors to the autonomy of the university council. Every time gender issues take preeminence in the constitution of the university council, its autonomy reduces by $.170$. It should also be reported that the gender diversity of the council is not a significant contributor to its autonomy when $p >.05$. From Table 2 above, it can also be seen that the age of the council members does not necessarily significantly affect the autonomy of the university council. While literature is not conclusive which age bracket nets to predict council autonomy better, it can be observed that age considerations in constituting the university council do not significantly contribute to the autonomy of the university council.

The standardized coefficients of the Betas show that stakeholder concentration, period of tenure, and church leaders' concentration are positive contributors to the autonomy of the university council, although their impact is not significant as the p -values are $>.05$. The table shows that with every new member who comes to the university council as a stakeholder, there is a positive change in the autonomy of the university council of $.125$. The period of tenure of the council members explains $.098$ variability in the autonomy of the university council. It should be observed that church leaders' concentration is the weakest positive contributor to the university's autonomy, with a standardized coefficient Beta of $.012$. This shows that with every additional

church leader on the council, there is little effect on the changes in the autonomy of the university council.

The coefficient table further demonstrates that the composition of the university council, its ethnic diversity, and the concentration of independent professionals in the university are stronger and significant contributors to the changes in the autonomy of the university council. As can be seen, the ethnic diversity of the university council explains $.216$ variability in the changes in university council autonomy, and its contribution is statistically significant as the p -value is $<.05$. The composition of the university council also contributes significantly to its autonomy as it predicts $.229$ variability, and it is significant. Finally, the concentration of independent professionals on the university council accounts for $.242$ changes in the university's autonomy with the smallest p -value of $<.05$.

Discussion

There is a positive correlation between the dependent variable (council autonomy) and the independent variables (proprietorship, ethnocentric, stakeholder, age, tenure, composition, gender, dual roles, size, and independent professionals), and the relationship is linear. The results demonstrate that the regression output is significant, while the model summary indicates that the combination of the independent variables is significant in predicting the autonomy of the university council and their coefficients constitute a significant and effective regression model for council autonomy.

The results show that in constituting the university council, church leaders or proprietors should not take leading roles in the council. Church leaders should not chair the full council meetings or council committees because doing so impacts the council's autonomy. It can also be suggested that church leaders should be appointed based on their expected contribution, competence, and the expertise they bring to the council and not simply based on their church positions.

The results show that considerations of gender diversity of the university council do not impact the autonomy of the university council. While the general practice appears to tilt towards a

complementary approach to the gender balance on the university council, gender balance should not be done for its own sake. Gender balance should be based on competence and a professional mix that adds real value to the functioning of the university council. Therefore, gender balance is not a significant factor in identifying contributors across gender in the governance of the university.

It has been found that the period of council membership tenure is not a significant predictor of council autonomy. It is not necessary to maintain members in our council beyond their professional usefulness. Stakeholders do not significantly contribute to council autonomy. While they may contribute to something positive, results show that their participation in the university council is not a significant factor.

It is important to note that ethnic diversity is a positive and significant contributor to the autonomy of the university council. This collaborates with literature (Erhardt et al. 2003) that the ethnically diverse board tends to be more robust in their decision-making. Therefore, the appointing authority of the university council will enhance its autonomy if they consider constituting an ethnically diverse university council.

In composing the university council, its structure should be intentionally designed to achieve the effectiveness and autonomy of the council. Results show that how a university council is composed critically impacts its autonomy. In doing so, the appointing authority needs to develop a rigorous checklist that would consider these key elements that drive the autonomy of the university council, like appropriate concentration of church leaders, period of tenure, stakeholder concentration, and meaningful inclusion of independent professionals.

As the coefficient table shows, the concentration of independent professionals on the University Council is the best predictor of its autonomy. They are expected to be independent in their contribution to the University governance. The regression shows that the role independent professional experts play in the functioning of the University Council is significant. Ensuring their participation improves Council autonomy.

In summary, note that the statistical regression analyses that were conducted assumed a linear relationship between the dependent and

independent variables. However, there is a need for future research to address advanced statistical procedures to validate further the results that have been reported through regression analyses. More complex statistical outputs would enable higher-level interpretation of the variables' interaction, hence aiding in understanding the complexity of these determinants of University Council autonomy.

Conclusion

Finally, the researchers can suggest that the council's structure should have an increased number of professionals who add value due to their experiences and qualifications. Church leaders whose expertise lies elsewhere and not in the management and governance of higher education add limited value to council functioning. It may be concluded that only church leaders who add a specific value of expertise in an area that is valuable to the governance of higher education should be invited to be members of the university council.

Autonomous and successful councils have intentional criteria for determining who participates and leads in university governance. Rather than dominate councils by a church leader, participation should be based on their competence and professional contribution to higher education governance. Other church leaders whose presence is merely ceremonial can attend by invitation on a representational and rotational basis. With intentional planning, the interests of the university can be served better through the guaranteed autonomy of the university council. The carefully formed university councils will create improved educational outcomes, academic success, and achievement of the mandate of the higher education.

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