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# Leadership Challenges in Change Management: Academic Leaders' Perspective in Ethiopia's Public Universities

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## Abstract

Ethiopian public higher education institutions have undergone State-initiated reform by adopting the guiding principles of Business Process Reengineering and *the corresponding programs* of change, including competency-based education and modularization, and curriculum harmonization for all undergraduate programs. This study *looked into* the leadership challenges associated with the change schemes and in *dealing with* the current environment in *Ethiopia's public universities*. A concurrent qualitative embedded mixed-methods research approach was employed by surveying 216 frontline academic leaders of six universities from the three generations of universities using a multi-stage stratified proportionate sampling and interviewing 22 purposively sampled academic leaders across the hierarchy. Results of the study *showed that the major leadership challenges throughout the universities* were resource constraints (financial, physical and material), lack of autonomy of the institutions and their leaders, and unsupportive organizational culture. The bureaucratic work condition challenge is reflected in varying degrees of influence. The lack of a consultative process and *assistance* from the Ministry of Education was also the main *obstacle*. *Additionally, management flaws in the universities, including unfairness and authority centralization challenged the intermediate and departmental levels of leadership*. The study concludes that the challenges are multifaceted requiring a *team effort* and that universities should review their management and leadership *practices*, and the ministry should revise its change management approach.

**Keywords:** leading change, organizational change, higher education leadership, leadership challenges

## 1. Introduction

Any organization must have a solid strategy for managing change. Through change management, organizations can adapt to the

competitive environment, helping them to survive (Mayende & Wanyoike, 2016; Zaniol et al., 2021). It has been noted that “the pressures for change in HE [Higher Education] are evident on all sides, and the

pace of change is ever increasing” (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009, p.688). The challenges that HE faces are at all levels [internationally, nationally, and institutionally] (Kurniady et al., 2019).

HEIs around the world are struggling to keep up with the demands of a competitive and rapidly changing environment. The recent factors that force organizations to change include those related to knowledge-based competition and shifting communication approaches (Musaigwa, 2023; Scott et al., 2008). The decrease in government funding and the need for income diversification, the changing consumer tastes, and growing student enrollment and diversity are also pressures for change in higher education (Scott et al., 2008). Besides, workforce diversity, increasing globalization, and government-initiated change programs influence the HEIs more (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). An increase in public accountability, new approaches to pedagogy (or online course delivery), and internationalization of institutions (Ellucian, 2021), and the expectation of government, families, and society as a whole from universities’ leadership to the digital technologies (Ellis, 2024) are also among the biggest challenges facing HEIs today.

HEIs need to alter their values and behaviors, embrace change, and become innovative. Organizations must understand and deal with change more than ever before. The global society is becoming complicated, requiring “educated citizens who can learn continuously and who can work with diversity, locally and internationally,” and the need for educational system change is urgent (Fullan, 2007). Reforming the HEIs

becomes essential in terms of academic programs in enhancing the competency of graduates for the nation’s building (Mohd Yassin et al., 2021).

Effective change management is unlikely to occur without quality leadership (Musaigwa, 2023; Zaniol et al., 2021). Effective leadership enables to develop the behaviors and actions and to alter beliefs and values needed to adapt to change; effective leadership ensures the successful navigation of change by embedding it in an organizational culture (Dinwoodie et al., 2015). Managers are primarily required to assume the responsibility of anticipating change and providing guidance and have the ability to identify, cope with, and capitalize on organizational change.

Research findings (Geijsel et al., 2003; Herold et al., 2008; Van der Voet et al., 2013) disclosed that transformational leadership facilitates the implementation of change as a function of employees’ commitment to change. Aziz et al. (2015) found that effective leaders reduce resistance to change and influence followers toward a readiness to embrace it. McNamara (2010) studied the role of transformative leadership and change strategies in successful HEIs change efforts using questionnaires to individuals and follow-up interviews with coordinators of the change process.

There is a growing concern about the issue of leading change and research undertakings are concerned with identifying the leadership behaviors and competencies for effective change management in organizations. Scholars have also extended the research and discussions about leader’s

role and leadership strategies in an organization to the applicability and roles of different leadership styles in the execution of the activities in the process of implementing organizational change (see Baesu & Bejinaru, 2013; Battilana et al., 2010).

In Ethiopia, there are several issues of change and concerns regarding the higher education system and the need for leadership to successfully manage them. The priority for government financial support has been on elementary and secondary education (Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia [FDRGE], 1994). And, HEIs are needed to create new sources of income generation to strengthen the educational process (FDRGE, 1994). HEIs are also required to develop and supply highly qualified and innovative human resources and create and transfer advanced and relevant knowledge (FDRE, 2009; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2015). They are also required to develop a research capacity and build a research culture, a culture of innovativeness and risk-taking on the part of faculty members. There is also a rapid expansion of students' enrollment with their diversified backgrounds and external quality audits. Additionally, HEIs are required to internationalize their teaching and research (MoE, 2015).

In line with provisions granted by the Higher Education Proclamation (HEP) (No. 351/2003) of the FDRE, major reforms have been made at the *overall system, institution, and academic program* levels. As per provisions granted by the HEP (No. 650/2009) of the FDRE, reform attempts have been made particularly, at institution and academic programs levels. The

country's public universities have also embarked on adapting the principles of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and its related initiatives since 2008, including Competency-Based Education (CBE) and modularization curricula, curriculum harmonization of the undergraduate programs, and quality assurance. The reforms require alteration of the institutions' overall functioning, including management and leadership approach, and teaching-learning and have resource implications.

In Ethiopia, different studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of the leadership of public universities and reported that the leadership is unfortunate. The leadership lacks to be transformational and accordingly, did not facilitate the institutions' transformation (Lerra, 2015; Zeleke, 2021). Durie and Beshir's (2016) study also disclosed that the leadership was not strategic enough to support the system to cope with the fast-changing situation. Change leadership seems to be overlooked.

Yukl (2010) argues that "Leading change is one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities" (p.298). It entails the responsibility to guide and facilitate the process of making a major change in an organization and regenerating an organization to cope with the dynamic environment (Yukl, 2010). In the context of this study, leadership and its effectiveness or *leading change* refers to a dynamic process of facilitating situations for change initiatives to be successfully introduced, implemented, and thereby sustained (for successful change implementation) as well as for improved practice so that organization can cope with the changing situation. An integrative view of organizational change

was considered, with both *planned* and *emergent* approaches to change being valid. Change in this study refers to both *discontinuity* (replacing or a shift in organizational routines with a new procedure of work) and *continuity* (continual improvements in organizational practices and processes or incremental change).

Leadership has role in the management of change while influenced by leadership quality factors and situational factors. According to Wan (2013), the critical factors for leading transformation are related to: ‘Leaders’ personal qualities’, ‘Leaders’ world views’, and ‘Situational factors’. Researches in higher education (e.g., D. Mitiku & B. Mitiku, 2017; Vlachopoulos, 2021) confirm that leaders’ lack of strategic plan or being visionary is the major challenge of the leadership to effectively lead change. The internal environment of the university, whether it is “‘change ready’ and ‘change capable’” is determinant in leaders’ effectiveness in managing organizational change (Scott et al., 2008, p. 40). Decentralization of power, risk-taking, openness to change, trust, teamwork, and open line of communication, among others, are the attributes that qualify a “‘change ready’” and “‘change capable’” university (Scott et al., 2008).

Thus, it is increasingly important to study the leadership challenges for managing change in the HEIs. However, research on the issue is scant. Fewer studies in Ethiopia can be found on leadership related to change management. They neither addressed the challenges facing the leadership for managing change (e.g., Zeleke, 2021) nor at the national level including representative universities (e.g.,

Lerra, 2015). The research so far investigated the challenges of the leadership relating to quality assurance (e.g., Abay & Marishane, 2023) and institutional performance to cope with the changing environment in a particular region (e.g., D. Mitiku & B. Mitiku, 2017). Abay and Marishane’s (2023) study revealed lack of efficient leadership, limitations in students’ competency and learning practice, low quality of the pre-higher education system, gaps in the qualification and competence of instructors and teaching practice, and facilities and resources constraints are the major challenges of the HEIs leadership in the concern towards assuring quality education.

This article examines leadership challenges in the management of change to enable leaders to play the role of change agents in HEIs in Ethiopia. It investigates leaders’ views towards the programs of change, and it addresses their views towards policy leadership and may influence educational policy decisions. The study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges that academic leaders face in relation to the programs of change in public universities in Ethiopia?
2. Is there a difference in the challenges encountered by academic leaders in connection with the programs of change across the three generations of Ethiopian public universities?
3. What are academic leaders’ perceptions of change efforts?

### 1.1.Change initiatives and their characteristics in Ethiopian public universities

The Government of Ethiopia, triggered with the vision of making the country one of the middle-income countries by 2025, includes the country's public HEIs as part of public organizations to undergo civil service reform since 2002 using BPR as the main reform tool (Kassahun, 2010).

Public universities in Ethiopia are embarked on implementing change initiatives in the academic realm, including the Competency-Based Education (CBE) Curricula, which includes elements: credit transfer system, modularization, flexible learning paths, differential assessment methods, and harmonizing curriculum in response to the major requirements of BPR (reengineering the core business process) (Gebremeskel, 2014). The very reasons for adopting the CBE are “relating learning with the world of work ...” and “for [a] closer link between academic learning and professional practice...” (Gebremeskel, 2014, p. 92).

The introduction of modularization as a framework for organizing the curriculum in the Ethiopian Higher Education system is to make the CBE a reality (MoE, 2012). According to Gebremeskel (2014) and MoE (2012), this framework consists of the following features:

- ✓ The structure of the curriculum is required to be competency-based as opposed to the previous subject-based curriculum; competencies are identified in line with the nature of the module. In this, construct the curriculum into modules by clustering related courses as well as

adding relevant courses from other disciplines. This requires academic program units to revise and plan their program/s; re-structure the curriculum into modules consisting of competencies or design a modular curriculum.

- ✓ Replacing the traditional credit point and credit hour system with European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The time allotment and workload to students extends to 'home study' in addition to contact hours for teachers' classroom lesson delivery, and the system of grading to be criterion-referenced.
- ✓ Block-teaching that requires instructors to adopt diversified student-centered approaches to teaching and assessment methods.

The following are suggested to facilitate the successful implementation of this reform program:

- Continuous training and advocacy workshop on poor competency of graduates, fragmented curriculum and mode of delivery [of the previous], relative advantages of modular curriculum
- Plan to get resources and effective utilization of the available resources
- Share experiences and urge the MOE to take [the] initiative for modularization and Harmonization
- Provide students support service remedial action
- Creating [an] enabling working environment
- Promotion of university-industry linkage. (MoE, 2012, p.39)

Therefore, the change initiatives require an enabling working environment

with furnished facilities, active engagement of both instructors and students, and the enactment of effective academic leadership. The kind of change that has been introduced in the higher learning institutions of Ethiopia is transformative and requires changing every aspect of an institution, including people, culture, structure, and technology, and strategic and transformational leadership approaches are required in this respect (Lerra, 2015).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants and Sampling

This research included 216 frontline academic leaders (or organizational academic units' (OAU) leaders) such as deans and department heads from six proportionately selected universities from the first three-clustered generations of Ethiopian public universities owned by the then MoE by way of a multi-stage stratified proportionate sampling. Studying the administration (management structure) and academic divisions of 31 universities at the time, a total of 1,831 academic leaders were identified. Out of this, 1,711 were frontline academic leaders. With the "95 percent confidence level and 5 percent confidence interval" (Cohen et al., 2007, p.104), 310 was decided as the total sample to represent the academic leaders at the front line. Depending upon the proportion of sample required from each stratum of universities that make up the total sample, six universities were taken as the study site. The universities included in the sample were Addis Ababa University, Bahir Dar University, Wellega University, Wollo University, Wolkite, and Adigrat University. Considering the proportional size of

participants for each selected university, middle-level OAUs such as colleges, faculties, and institutes were selected at each selected university using the simple random sampling (lottery system). All academic leaders under the jurisdiction of the selected OAUs' were considered as potential sample participants to be involved through comprehensive sampling. However, two-hundred twenty (220) participants returned the questionnaires distributed, which was nearly 71% return. Of these, data from 216 participants were used.

Twenty-two experienced academic leaders of the change process were also purposefully selected from across the hierarchy in all the selected universities, with a focus on the pool of academic leaders of the *QUAN* aspect of the research and the sample frame. The interviewees were either involved in a formal academic-related leadership role during the introduction of the competency-based and modularization curricula or had been in those roles for a long period (from 3 to 4 and above years of experience). Five interviewees worked at the top-level of academic affairs, 7 were deans or directors of faculties/colleges/academy, and 10 were heads of departments.

### 2.2. Data Gathering Instruments and Procedures

A self-developed mixed-item form of questionnaire is administered to frontline academic leaders. *Narrative* forms of interviews are also conducted with experienced academic leaders of the change process. Narrative interview as "story-based interview techniques" (Leong & Tan, 2013) helps participants tell their stories. This approach helped get the lived and subjective

experience of leaders during change implementation in their organizations. The questionnaire reached an acceptable reliability of .58, removing one of the constructs: 'resistance to change' for the measure. Access to participants was made through the researcher's personal visit and contact. Telephone interviewing was adapted as a strategy to collect data particularly, from the one exception site. This is appropriate primarily owing to immersion in the environment was not necessary and the issue of investigation is not sensitive and does not upset the respondents (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). The interviews were conducted in Amharic and recorded and transcribed by the principal researcher.

### 2.3. Methods of Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed with the help of SPSS. Frequencies were used to describe leadership challenges. To confirm whether a factor/s is/are challenge/s or not, the Legacy option Chi-square test was computed. To screen out the challenges at the level of their influence, mean rank was also used. Besides, the Crosstab Chi-square test (or  $X^2$  measure of association) was tested for statistical significance in the challenges across the three generations of Ethiopian public universities at alpha level of .05. The thematic analysis of data from open-ended questionnaires and interviews was conducted. Data from the interviews were also analyzed using the 'narrative method' of presenting and telling leaders' personal experiences verbatim.

### 2.4. Ethical Considerations

The study followed an ethical approach in that the use of informed consent forms, in-

person contact and agreement in setting a time frame for interviewing as well as the use of a recorder. Logical approach to data processing and utilization was also kept. Besides, the participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

## 3. Results

This study has attempted to examine the leadership challenges for managing change in the public universities of Ethiopia. Resource constraints, especially in terms of lack of finance, physical and material resources, lack of autonomy of institutions and their leaders, and unsupportive organizational culture were major challenges across the universities, but personal factors, human resource constraints, and a lot of change going in the organization were not. The data in Table 1 indicate them in their sequence.

Table 1 shows that a significant number of respondents: 74.6%, 71.8%, 66.7%, 57.3%, and 55.9% respectively replied that lack of financial resource, bureaucratic working condition, lack of physical and material resources, lack of autonomy of the institutions and their leaders, and lack of collaboration and trust among staff and leaders themselves were the major challenges. Results of the nonparametric test (Legacy option Chi-square test) also indicated this. The value of standard residual (SR) of the test in the variables identified as 'the major challenge' and 'not challenge' respectively was with positive values in the "yes" and "no" options reflecting that they were confirmed by a large number of subjects more than expected.

The Mean Ranks of the factors indicated top five challenges in descending order. that the aforementioned five factors were the

Table 1. The Respondents' Perceptions of Leadership Challenges in Relation to Change Management in Universities (n=213)

| N0. | Factors                                                                         | Yes           |       | No            |       | Mean Rank | Rank             |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------|---------------|-------|-----------|------------------|
|     |                                                                                 | Frequency (%) | SR    | Frequency (%) | SR    |           |                  |
| 1.  | Personal Related Factors                                                        |               |       |               |       |           |                  |
|     | 1.1.Lack of skills in developing a vision                                       | 57(26.8)      | -49.5 | 156(73.2)     | 49.5  | .27       | 10 <sup>th</sup> |
|     | 1.2.Lack of skills for effective communication                                  | 54(25.4)      | -52.5 | 159(74.6)     | 52.5  | .25       | 11 <sup>th</sup> |
|     | 1.3.Lack of skills in team-building & fostering cooperative culture among staff | 89(41.8)      | -17.5 | 124(58.2)     | 17.5  | .42       | 6 <sup>th</sup>  |
|     | 1.4.Lack of skills in motivating staff to change                                | 80(37.6)      | -26.5 | 133(62.4)     | 26.5  | .38       | 8 <sup>th</sup>  |
| 2.  | Resource constraints                                                            |               |       |               |       |           |                  |
|     | 2.1.Lack of financial resource                                                  | 159(74.6)     | 52.5  | 54(25.4)      | -52.5 | .75       | 1 <sup>st</sup>  |
|     | 2.2.Lack of physical and material resources                                     | 142(66.7)     | 35.5  | 71(33.3)      | -35.5 | .67       | 3 <sup>rd</sup>  |
|     | 2.3.Human resource constraint                                                   | 86(40.4)      | -20.5 | 127(59.6)     | 20.5  | .40       | 7 <sup>th</sup>  |
| 3.  | Lack of autonomy (of institution and its leaders)                               | 122(57.3)     | 15.5  | 91(42.7)      | -15.5 | .57       | 4 <sup>th</sup>  |
| 4.  | A lot of change going on in the organization                                    | 75(35.2)      | -31.5 | 138(64.8)     | 31.5  | .35       | 9 <sup>th</sup>  |
| 5.  | Unsupportive organizational culture                                             |               |       |               |       |           |                  |
|     | 5.1. Bureaucratic nature of the working condition                               | 153(71.8)     | 46.5  | 60(28.2)      | -46.5 | .72       | 2 <sup>nd</sup>  |
|     | 5.2. Lack of collaboration and trust among staff and leaders                    | 119(55.9)     | 12.5  | 94(44.1)      | -12.5 | .56       | 5 <sup>th</sup>  |

*Note. Numbers in parenthesis are percentages. SR=Standard Residual*

Whereas results of the mean ranks indicated that the last four factors, i.e., lack of skills for effective communication, lack of skills in developing a vision, a lot of change going on in the organization, and lack of skills in motivating staff to change were the least challenges in ascending order. Nearly one-fourth of the participants: 25.4% and 26.8%, and one-third: 35.2% and 37.6% respectively indicated that the last four

challenges might not be considered challenges by most academic leaders at the studied universities.

They also mentioned that the lack of a comfortable work environment (poor work facilities like offices, transportation, and residence), external interference in the internal decisions (including in the appointment of leaders in administrative positions through political power), and

university constituents' negative value system and relationships are most challenging factors for the leadership in their respective universities. A considerable number (25 or 36.77%) of the respondents, across all of the studied universities, also mentioned manifestations of "unsupportive organizational culture" such as the *university's management team, academic staff, and students* lack of motivation to be involved in the change process and lack of decisive risk-taking among staff and the management; *academic and supportive staff, and students'* dishonesty, lack of cooperativeness, and informal networks based on religion, ethnic group, and relatives; and *Rigidity in Organizational management and its rules*. The interview data revealed that lack of interest and supportive approach on the part of teachers and students towards the programs of change (resistance), and students' poor background, input constraints, and gaps in the organization and management system of the universities were the most pressing challenges they experienced and observed.

Four generic themes emerged from the qual (interview) data analysis. The first three are partially aligned with the themes from the open-ended questions of the questionnaire. The themes are:

**Theme 1. Lack of interest and supportive approach from teachers and students**

Academic leaders across the hierarchy indicated that teachers and students were not interested in the modular course delivery approach, continuous assessment, and 1 to 5 grouping due to the lack of a furnished work environment and the approach by which they were introduced. Additionally,

teachers' unsupportive approach in the general term as the lack of teachers' engagement to contribute to their university beyond teaching was a challenge. One academic leader who was an Academic Vice President of a university in citing his case story indicated the prevalence of the problem of lack of teachers' engagement as follows:

"Many teachers are not serious. They teach and leave their institution. They do not worry about where the picture is, where we are going. ... The university can operate by itself; it has a calendar and then, according to the calendar, teachers will teach and students will learn." (TLAL14)

Additionally, students' poor background was identified as one of the major challenges related to the programs of change, particularly active learning and continuous assessment. Academic leaders indicated that a lack of students' active engagement in learning activities was noticed by themselves as teachers as well as from other teachers' complaints. Complaints from teachers about students' approaches create a challenge for academic leaders. An exemplary quote from a college dean of a university is:

"There is an advocacy on student-centered approach. But, when I saw as a manager, the situation was challenging not only for teachers but also for me. Students ... hated those teachers who were inquisitive. Whereas, teachers who use chalk and talk approach, provide notes and handouts were appreciated." (MLAL16)

## Theme 2. Input constraints and lack of facilities.

Academic leaders indicated that their workplace is not well furnished to run active teaching methods, modular delivery approach, and the other new procedures in teaching and learning. Academic leaders identified infrastructure as the main challenge in engineering and technology, natural and computational sciences, and agriculture and environmental science fields of study.

## Theme 3. Limitations in institutional management and unsupportive system structure

The QUAL data analysis of responses from open-ended question of the questionnaire and interview revealed that *gaps related to the management of universities*, particularly *power centralization* and *lack of strategic approach* were the most pressing challenges. The data analysis from the open-ended questionnaire item also disclosed that *unfairness* in appointing and recruiting personnel for a leadership position and/or recognition and in recruiting teaching staff, and *lack of accountability* were signs of gaps in the management.

### *Financial centralization and an unsupportive purchasing system*

The qualitative data revealed that, especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of universities, decision-making power was accumulated at the center and the OAUs' level managers could not mandate in many aspects, especially in financial issues. In the interview, academic leaders indicated that the management in their universities is more bureaucratic and has an unsupportive

purchasing system, which hindered them from acting strategically, from envisioning, and from implementing their plans.

Financial centralization and an unsupportive purchasing system as academic leaders' challenges were summarized in the experience of the following two academic leaders. One participant, who was a Head of Department, described the consequences as follows:

"The more centralized administration would lead to dependency syndrome on the part of middle-level leaders. ... The budget has been enrolled. We could not use the budget allocated from the ministerial office due to a gap in the purchasing unit." (LLAL4)

Another participant, who was a Dean of College, in describing the impacts, said:

"There is no allocation of the budget at the beginning of the budget year in consideration of our plan. If this were not, we could lead our plan by compromising with the required budget. ... What you plan to accomplish during the first semester may not be realized [purchased/obtained]. ... Academic task is time-bounded. We are required to run as per the academic calendar. We could not postpone tasks like tasks in other offices. The task, which is within the first semester, must be accomplished within that duration". (MLAL11)

Another academic leader in a general sense noted:

"Our main challenge at the institution level is the administrative system is not

decentralized. We do not have power ... to design strategy and inculcating the issue of change.” (MLAL5).

#### *Lack of strategic approach of the management*

The lack of strategic approach of the management was indicated in terms of a lack of top-level leadership expertise and vision, the imposition of urgent and unprogrammed tasks and meetings from the top of their universities’ management, as well as requests for a series of reports. This limitation spills over to the OAU’s level management as they were requested to be engaged in routine and tedious tasks. These include reporting series of reports and attending series of unprogrammed meetings. They indicated that this situation deterred them from focusing on the three focal areas of the university: teaching-learning, research, and community services.

#### **Theme 4. Top-down change management mentality**

The authorities’ approach in introducing the tools of change management is found to be a challenge for the academic leaders. It was verified in the interview that academic leaders strongly believe that the programs of change do not have inherent problems. They indicated that active teaching methods, continuous assessment, cooperative learning, etc are effective approaches that would contribute to achievement in learning. The problem, rather, was the approach through which they were introduced. The approach was not consultative and there was no effort of authorities to ensure consensus with implementers at the university level as well as to follow up on the progress of

implementation. They also indicated that most of the change initiatives introduced in the history of higher education in Ethiopia, including Kaizen, BPR do not appear in a way to align with the dynamics of the academic situation that require experts’ comments in the field/academics. Accordingly, they perceived that they were imposed to adopt the programs of change. Concerning this, academic leaders did not consider the directives (programs of change) from the top of the Ministry as change.

Academic leaders’ conceptualization of change rather implies education organization effectiveness or an improvement in the performance of education system towards the quality of education, particularly in terms of ensuring teachers’ and students’ success. That is, change is conceptualized as a situation, a system, or a process that is conducive to the teaching and learning work, which should be initiated internally, that is, at the institutions themselves or from the top in consultation with the concerned individuals at the grassroots level.

Academic leaders’ perception towards the programs of change and the approach through which they were introduced was summarized in the experience of the following two academic leaders. One participant who was an Academic Vice President explained his outlook citing the cooperative learning approach as a case in point as follows:

“Cooperative learning is a good style, but not the only style. It appears in our country as a good model with a wrong opinion. ... The absence of educators’ involvement in commenting on

programs of change that the government has introduced is considered one of the biggest challenges for university leaders and implementers generally.” (TLAL17).

Another participant who was a Head of Department, in expressing her feeling towards the approach through which the programs of change were introduced, said:

“The approach was not participatory (no open leadership) and the individuals, who were assumed to play the role of a change agent and the programs of change seemed to be oil and water. These individuals seemed to be an oil and floated [they did not internalize the essence of the programs of change they advocated]. Thus, because it did not appear in following the scientific approach (not based on study as well as following an open leadership, the change that could have been important tended to fail.).” (LLAL20).

Accordingly, from the interview, it was also verified that Ethiopia’s public universities and their leadership did not enjoy real autonomy.

### **Leadership Challenges as per Generation of Universities**

Results of mean rank indicated that the leadership challenges might not be the concern of academic leadership across the three generations of Ethiopian public universities at similar status. The results of mean rank showed that the 1<sup>st</sup> leadership challenge in change management for the 1<sup>st</sup>

generation universities was the bureaucratic nature of the working condition, lack of financial resource was the 1<sup>st</sup> challenge for the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, and lack of physical and material resources was the 1<sup>st</sup> challenge for the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation public universities of Ethiopia. Whereas the least leadership challenge observed for the 1<sup>st</sup> generation universities is a lack of skills of effective communication followed by a lack of skills of developing vision, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation universities, lack of skills of visioning was found to be the least challenge followed by the lack of skills of effective communication. None of the challenges were ranked at a similar status across the three generations of universities. To check the statistical significance, the Chi-square test of independence (or the crosstab measure of association) is performed. The results indicated the non-significance. Table 2 presents this.

As can be seen in Table 2, except for the bureaucratic work condition challenge, the crosstab Chi-square results show there is not a statistically significant deviation in the respondents’ perception of the leadership challenges among the three university groupings. The *p*-value for the rest of the challenges was found to be greater than the alpha level (.05). Thus, one cannot conclude that an association exists between the two categorical variables. The results suggest that except for the challenge of the bureaucratic working condition, the challenges were the concern of academic leaders/ship across the three generations of universities in a similar status.

Table 2. Results of Cross Tabulation Chi-square Test for Leadership Challenges by Generations of Universities

| Leadership Challenges                                           |     | Generations of Universities |                 |                 | Total<br>n=213 | X <sup>2</sup> | p-value |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
|                                                                 |     | 1 <sup>st</sup>             | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | 3 <sup>rd</sup> |                |                |         |
|                                                                 |     | generation                  | generation      | generation      |                |                |         |
|                                                                 |     | n=73                        | n=84            | n=56            |                |                |         |
| Lack of skills of developing a vision                           | Yes | 19(33.3%)                   | 22(38.6%)       | 16(28.1)        | 57 (100%)      | .128           | .938    |
|                                                                 | Not | 54(34.6%)                   | 62 (39.7%)      | 40(25.6)        | 156 (100%)     |                |         |
| Lack of skills of effective communication                       | Yes | 13(24.1%)                   | 25(46.3%)       | 16(29.6%)       | 54(100%)       | 3.37           | .186    |
|                                                                 | Not | 60(37.7%)                   | 59(37.1%)       | 40(25.2%)       | 159(100%)      |                |         |
| Lack of skills of team-building & fostering cooperative culture | Yes | 33(37.1)                    | 35(39.3%)       | 21(23.6%)       | 89(100%)       |                |         |
|                                                                 | Not | 40(32.3)                    | 49(39.5%)       | 35(28.2%)       | 124(100.0%)    | .774           | .679    |
| Lack of skills of motivating staff to change                    | Yes | 32(40.0%)                   | 28(35.0%)       | 20(25.0%)       | 80(100.0%)     | 1.95           | .378    |
|                                                                 | Not | 41(30.8%)                   | 56(42.1%)       | 36(27.1%)       | 133(100.0%)    |                |         |
| Lack of financial resource                                      | Yes | 59(37.1)                    | 58(36.5)        | 42(24.4%)       | 159(100.0%)    | 2.87           | .239    |
|                                                                 | Not | 14(25.9%)                   | 26(48.1%)       | 14(25.9%)       | 54(100.0%)     |                |         |
| Lack of physical and material resources                         | Yes | 43(30.3%)                   | 57(40.1%)       | 42(29.6%)       | 142(100.0%)    | 3.783          | .151    |
|                                                                 | Not | 30(42.3%)                   | 27(38.0%)       | 14(19.7%)       | 71 (100.0%)    |                |         |
| Human resource constraint                                       | Yes | 33(38.4%)                   | 36(41.9%)       | 17(19.8%)       | 86(100.0%)     | 3.26           | .196    |
|                                                                 | Not | 40(31.5%)                   | 48(37.8%)       | 39(30.7%)       | 127 (100.0%)   |                |         |
| Lack of autonomy (of institution and its leaders)               | Yes | 50 (41.0%)                  | 42(34.4%)       | 30(24.6%)       | 122 (100.0%)   | 5.89           | .053    |
|                                                                 | Not | 23(25.3%)                   | 42(46.2%)       | 26(28.6%)       | 91 (100.0%)    |                |         |
| A lot of change going on in the organization                    | Yes | 31 (41.3%)                  | 25(33.3%)       | 19(25.3%)       | 75(100.0%)     | 2.82           | .244    |
|                                                                 | Not | 42(30.4%)                   | 59 (42.8%)      | 37(26.8%)       | 138 (100.0%)   |                |         |
| Bureaucratic nature of working condition                        | Yes | 60(39.2%)                   | 54(35.3%)       | 39(25.5%)       | 153(100.0%)    | 6.37           | .041*   |
|                                                                 | Not | 13(21.7)                    | 30(50.0%)       | 17(28.3%)       | 60(100.0%)     |                |         |
| Lack of collaboration and trust among staff and leaders         | Yes | 41(34.5)                    | 50(42.0)        | 28(23.5%)       | 119(100.0%)    | 1.24           | .538    |
|                                                                 | Not | 32(34.0%)                   | 34(36.2)        | 28(29.8)        | 94(100.0%)     |                |         |

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages within a particular leadership challenge.

*Asymp sig (2 tailed); df=2*

*P\* < .05*

#### 4. Discussion

The prevalence of strong relationships and collaboration among members of an organization facilitates the successful adoption of reform and creates the capacity for an organization to be a center of change (Houchens & Keedy, 2009). Commitment, a

large number of reciprocal relationships, informal networks, good interpersonal relationships, and collective approaches within the university are all aspects of “a university culture supportive of effective change management” (Scott et al., 2008). However, Gebremeskel (2015) found that unsupportive organizational culture

including low commitment and sense of ownership of leaders, and poor interpersonal relationships among leaders themselves and with staff impaired the adoption of state-initiated management innovation (BPR). Adamu's (2019) qualitative investigation on the implementation of the 2017 (MoE) strategy for selecting and appointing higher education leaders in one Ethiopian public university revealed that there was a complaint in the university communities on the leadership selection and appointment process.

Financial centralization as one of the major challenges especially for the middle and lower-level academic leaders indicates that OAU's and their leaders in the universities are not empowered. Above all, it seems to contribute to facing the working budget constraint. This situation contradicts the financial administration policy (i.e., program-based budgeting and fiscal decentralization) that the country advocates in the subsector. The FDRE HEP No.650/2009 article 18:2 requires public HEIs to adopt a decentralized financial management system by granting the necessary autonomy to their academic units in finance, including the right to manage their budget (FDRE, 2009).

The significance of leadership across the organizational levels: from the executive to the curriculum level is increasingly recognized (Beerkens & van der Hoek, 2022). According to Beerkens and van der Hoek (2022), "Department heads have become a crucial leadership level as they are directly responsible for teaching and research activities in their unit" (p.7).

Research suggests that this group of leaders is critical to change efforts in higher education (e.g., Anderson et al., 2008). Important leadership functions are also fulfilled by academic leadership at the curriculum level such as by program directors and chairs of various committees, especially for the implementation of change programs as well as ensuring quality culture and the capacity to create change (Beerkens & van der Hoek, 2022). In general, campus leaders (or leadership) are indispensable to cope with the current globalized environment that requires internationalizing higher education (Said et al., 2015). However, there is a question on whether university management ensures the academic mission of the institution (Sall & Oanda, 2014). Their review discloses that the impact of reform in governance in terms of diminishing collegiality and faculty involvement even in the decision on academic affairs of institutions is one of the major gaps in African universities' governance and leadership. In explaining the existing governance and leadership system and its impediment, they further note:

While leadership is innovative in seeking alternative funding strategies, intellectual accountability and output has been weak. Institutional-level accountability from management is still weak. ... Government residual powers in management remain a threat to real governance autonomy, while faculty and students are more often overlooked on issues of policy and institutional governance. (p.106)

This situation indicates that there is a violation of the education policy and

authority granted for higher education through the FDRE HEP (No.650/2009). The 1994 education and training policy of the country indicates that HEIs will be autonomous in their internal administration which is a strategy of the policy related to organization and management of the education system. Areaya's (2010) study also disclosed that "Excessive intervention by the Federal Ministry of Education and lack of Autonomy" were the main factors that challenged Ethiopian public universities and their academic communities in implementing government-initiated and controlled reforms toward achieving quality education and service (p.95).

Academic leaders are skeptical of the approach used to introduce academic-related programs of change in Ethiopian public universities, believing that change toward the quality of education should emanate from the organization itself and/or with the active involvement of academic staff. Recent research reports revealed that there is a gap in the model of change and reform process [changing and reforming the higher education system] accustomed by the Ethiopian education bureaucrats (Gebremeskel & Feleke, 2016; Olkaba & Tamene, 2019; Tadesse & Melese, 2016). Their findings disclosed that the trend is top-down and centralized without necessary considerations for implementation, including academic staff's involvement. This characteristic of system structure will create a lack of risk-taking behavior and initiate change on the part of university leaders as well as the leadership team. And accordingly, they will act as agents of

stability, rather than as agents of change (D. Mitiku & B. Mitiku, 2017).

In this regard, resistance on the part of students and faculty was indicated as a challenge. Resistance to change was due to resource constraints and an uncomfortable work environment that did not fit with the requirements of the programs of change and the approach by which they were introduced. The mentioned reasons for the resistance may also be a reflection of the management of change exercised by the Ministry. Change initiator requires examining the existing organizational capability and requirements for the change to be adopted, among others.

Resistance to change is natural. Human response to change has a continuum within which resistance at the initial stage in the change process: "shock, denial, anger, blame, bargain, apathy, acceptance, explore, understand, integrate, sustain" (SudeshNasiket & Namdeo, 2023, p.651). Institutional leadership is a determinant in managing resistance to change timely (Hubbart, 2023), particularly through communicating. Communicating change using the conversation and dialogue model is a key leadership requirement for managing change, particularly in higher education (Vettori, n.d.). Getting faculty committed to change requires "getting [the communication] personal"; a need to effectively communicate how the change will impact them: clarify how it will make their job easier and more interesting (Ellucian, 2021, p.15). Change resistance in the context of an organization can indicate the required improvements in the approach

of change management towards successful change initiatives. One of the roles for effective change management is, therefore, to understand and address the resistance to change (Hubbart, 2023).

A case study by Dzimbiri (2009) revealed that an absence of backing-up the change initiative with the strategic examination of its environment, including concerns by employees, students of the University, the resource implications and stakeholders involvement were among the challenges for implementing the change. Based on a review of research about the influence of leadership on student learning, Leithwood et al. (2004) note that the chance of any reform towards improving student learning is out-of-scope unless local level and institutional leaders agree with the purpose of the reform, and committed to its requirements for implementation. The *politics of policy change and reform* should be considered to ensure “political will, favorable timing and suitable situations” to bring about change (Cerna, 2013, p.16). As long as higher education has diversified stakeholders, most importantly those who are potentially experts, the process of change required to be participative involves hearing their voice.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

The study's findings indicated the influence of HEI-specific factors and the change management approach of the education authority on the leadership for managing change. Resource constraints, including the financial resources of the working budget, remain the biggest challenge that needs the HEIs to adopt income diversifications more than ever before such as running

investments and projects. This requires strategic leadership, among others. Academic leaders in public universities of Ethiopia have a positive perception towards the programs of change and believe in the need for change while they showed reservations about the approach by which they are introduced. It calls upon the ministerial officials to revisit the approach to change management.

Ethiopia's public universities need to revisit their management and leadership processes. Unfairness in the selection and appointment process, both for leadership and teaching positions and in recognizing and rewarding them, is cited as one of the major challenges.

## 6. Recommendations

Ethiopia's Higher Education Ministry should consult HEIs and educators in its every effort towards change and improvement in the sector, and monitor and follow up the progress of programs of change.

Universities should enjoy real autonomy to think about their future with greater accountability. There should also be a system of accountability in institutional leadership.

Universities should grant an appropriate level of authority to their academic units and their leaders, and follow a consultative approach to change management.

The study, however, did not triangulate the view of the various stakeholders, including non-administrative academic leaders (or instructors) and students. This is to be considered in future study.

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