

Exploring the Practice of Academic Freedom and Active Learning in Ethiopia's Higher Education: A Case Study

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Given the immense role of the student-centred approach in enhancing students learning, this study explores the role of academic freedom in implementing a student-centred approach. To achieve this objective, the study relies on a qualitative case study research design. In this regard, semi-structured interviews and observation were employed as data gathering tools. The data passed through a series of data analysis processes ranging from data reduction to data verification. The study was conducted at a public university in Ethiopia and recruited ten instructors and twelve students from four randomly selected colleges/institutes belonging to the participating university. The initial analysis resulted in two major themes, each having two subthemes. That is academic freedom at the institutional level for instructors and students and academic freedom at the classroom for instructors and students. Given this, the findings show that the academic freedom of students at the classroom level affects the adoption of student-centred approaches. Students seem to be restrained from freely sharing their concerns, being afraid of the backlash from their instructors and colleagues. Moreover, the instructors in Abay University seem excluded in deciding to implement a student-centred approach in every classroom other than receiving pedagogical training to implement it as a non-negotiable change. These findings call for higher education reforms at national and institutional levels to cultivate an organisational environment that facilitates student-centred approaches.

Keywords: student-centred approach, academic freedom, active learning approaches, higher education, Ethiopia

Introduction

Changes in organisations are inevitable in the age of information and globalisation, leading them to search for innovative ways of conducting business (Saint-Onge & Armstrong, 2004). Further, globalisation increasingly demands diverse changes in higher education institutions (Mok, 2010). Stakeholders in these institutions demand that they be more accountable and transparent and bring concrete proof of success. Changes in higher learning institutions could be achieved through working continuously on innovation in curricula, teaching strategies, support services, and overall functioning (White & Glickman, 2007). According to Zhu and Engels (2014), these innovations in higher education are of

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paramount importance to properly prepare a new generation for a knowledge society. By considering this fact, higher education institutions should promote innovative practices in the significant activities they are concerned with. Hence, this study aims to explore the impact of academic freedom on active learning approaches in a public university in Ethiopia.

Reform of Ethiopian Higher Education System

Motivated by the need for better performance and the desire to answer stakeholders' expectations, the Ethiopian higher education system has promoted various reforms as witnessed in revising the inherited legacy (Yizengaw, 2005). This is due to higher education institutions being “organic in the sense that their parts (norms, ideas, organisations, and frameworks) are subjected to change in response to internal and external pressures, to maintain stability in the institutional arrangement as a whole” (Waks, 2007, p. 287). In cognisance of this, the new Ethiopian higher education proclamation, approved by the parliament in 2003, served as a starting point for implementing innovative reforms (World Bank, 2003). One of these reforms was a shift in pedagogical philosophy from instructor-led teaching to student-centred learning (MoE, 2015). Since then, student-centred learning has focused on education reform in Ethiopia and has repeatedly been mentioned in policy documents (Ayele, Schippers, & Ramos, 2007).

Consequently, Ethiopian public universities have long acknowledged the significance and worth of active learning approaches. Administrators of higher education institutions duly dedicated resources to the pedagogical training for faculty members. However, implementing these approaches in higher education classrooms has failed to match the expectations set by the Ethiopian government (Alemu, 2010; Teshome, 2012; Woldeamanuel, Atagana, & Engida, 2013). Not all new approaches have been understood and implemented as expected since there could be “forces that work to conserve the status quo in public education” (Senge, 2010, p. 150).

Academic Freedom in the Ethiopian Higher Education System

The Ethiopian higher education system ‘academic freedom’ is a known concept reflected in different national and institutional level-related documents. In this regard, Ethiopia’s fifth Education Sector Development Program indicated that higher education institutions should encourage freedom of ‘views’ and ‘opinions’ as a value reflected in education and research endeavours. However, this academic freedom is subjected to limitations set by other laws (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2009). Based on this national direction, the notion of academic freedom is reflected in the official documents of the Abay University and is described as:

Academic freedom shall mean the right to discuss and openly express views on ideas, immediate national and global problems, and issues as well as other controversial matters in class, in connection with academic work on campus in discussion groups

or print provided the expression of views is generally relevant to the subject under discussion and is consistent with rational and intellectual inquiry. (AU, 2013a, p. 206)

Role of University Teachers in Academic Freedom

Concerning an instructor's participation in university's affairs, "an academic staff of the university shall design, develop and implement courses in an area of specialisation following established university procedures..." (AU, 2013b, p. 25). This is justified by Briggs and Sommefeldt (2002), who stated that teaching course contents prepared by a higher administrative body without the involvement of instructors and students would result in a teaching approach that mainly emphasised outcomes while overlooking the development and propagation of innovative ideas among students, and between instructors and students. Moreover, in an education system where "a national curriculum is tightly defined..., instructors may find themselves 'teaching to the test' using a teacher-centred approach" (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002, p. 46). This necessitates making instructors free to determine their teaching strategies by considering different factors, including the type of students and the time available to teach a lesson (Marzano, 2007).

As promoted in the institutional document of Abay University, students are entitled to participate in different university-wide activities. Among others, the Senate Legislation of the university points out that students can "give suggestions in the preparation of by-laws, regulations, and directives pertaining to administrative matters, and the review and development of curricula" (AU, 2013a, p. 206). Concerning student learning, Jackson (2020) argued that students' experiences play a vital role in achieving and realizing academic freedom, hence, learning. This highlights the importance of academic freedom at the classroom level. The Abay University declared that instructors should avoid imposing their own political beliefs and views on students (AU, 2013b).

Moreover, the Senate Legislation of the Abay University points out that students have the right to "participate in a free exchange of ideas in an open academic environment" (AU, 2013a, p. 206). To this end, instructors are responsible to "create a learning environment in which learners feel free to answer a question, knowing that there will be no cost to them if they are wrong" (Michael & Modell, 2003, p. 96). To create such a learning environment where students feel emotionally safe, it is indispensable to maintain "trusting relationships between students and instructors, and among students...to do this, professors lead by example by listening to students and treating them with both respect and compassion" (Soltis, 2015, p. 28).

Without assuring the freedom of students in the classroom, "instructors' efforts to try to get students to reflect ... [will be] easily undermined by instructors' authority and formal power, which intimidates students programmed to seek correct answers" (Senge, 2010, p. 139). In general terms, Abay University seems to be dedicated to "...duty-bound to enact rules and regulations governing the academic right, freedoms, and responsibilities of its staff" (AU, 2013a, p. 31).

However, this does not mean that the concept is in good status in terms of implementation.

Academic Freedom Hindering Factors

In the existing competitive environment of the intellectual world, academic freedom and autonomy values are endangered (Fair-weather, 1999; Grappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007, cited in Hardré & Cox, 2009). According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) (2006), “instructors are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their controversial teaching matter which has no relation to their subject” (p. 3).

It should be noted that academic freedom in higher education is not moulded so much by the existing education laws and regulations but by all students and academic staff (Mccrae, 2011). In the same vein, Badley (2009) asserted that “academics and students will inhabit a university space as a place from where to speak’ only when they are free from administrative, corporate, religious and state constraints to be scholars who speak and write differently...” (p. 160). In attributing students’ freedom to students’ freedom at the institutional level, Mccrae (2011) argues that instructors could not value students’ freedom of expression in the context wherein the instructors are themselves deprived of the right of free expression. This implies that in the classroom context of a higher education institution where academic freedom is lacking, students may have less chance of taking a central role in the teaching/learning process.

The Present Study

Recent studies in different contexts reported a relationship between academic freedom in higher education and political power. Among these contexts are Turkey (Fındıklı, 2020), Germany (Thompson, 2020), Vietnam (Marklein & Van Tinh, 2020), the UK (Morrish, 2020), Hungary (Bárd, 2020), and Russia (Oleksiyenko, 2020). However, other authors argue that this granted academic freedom should not be so flexible to affect education negatively. For instance, the academic staff should not have so much freedom in choosing their teaching methods as this can affect the learning outcomes (Finn, 2020). Jackson (2020) argues that regardless of the importance of academic freedom for academics and students, this concept should be approached more broadly to include other factors beyond the political influence on academic freedom. To this end, this study takes an ethnographic approach to explore the impact of academic freedom on implementing a student-centred approach in one anonymous public higher education institution in Ethiopia with the pseudonym “Abay University” (AU). The study attempted to answer the following two questions: (1) How instructors’ academic freedom contributes to adopting a student-centred approach at Abay University? and (2) How students’ academic freedom supports implementing the student-centred approach at Abay University?

Methods

To answer the fundamental research question of the study, a single-site case study design was adopted (Flick, 2007; Jones, Rodger, Ziviani, & Boyd, 2012). The study was conducted in a public university in Ethiopia with the pseudonym of “Abay University.” One of Ethiopia’s leading higher learning institutions provides instructors with year-long advanced pedagogical training to help them implement different teaching approaches and assessment techniques in the actual classroom.

Participants

Ten instructors from four colleges/faculties of Abay University were recruited purposively, believing that their classrooms are equipped with different teaching aids. They have better knowledge and awareness about student-centred approaches they took a year-long pedagogical in the same university. Considering that other personal characteristics of instructors may affect their adoption of student-centred approaches, efforts have been made to recruit instructors having different qualifications, gender, academic rank, etc. Similarly, twelve (12) students who were taught by the same instructors and served as class representatives were selected purposively, considering that they could represent and reflect students’ viewpoints in their respective programs concerning academic freedom and student-centred approach. For a detailed description of the participants see Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Instructor Participants

Participants' codes	Sex	Discipline	Qualification	Academic Status	Teaching Experience	College/Faculty
T1	F	Nursing	Master	Lecturer	4 Years	CMHS
T2	F	Medical Microbiology	PhD	Assistant Professor	10 years	CMHS
T3	M	Pharmacy	Master	Lecturer	3 Years	
T4	F	Mechanical Engineering	Master	Lecturer	5 years	IT
T5	M	Hydraulic	PhD	Assistant Professor	6 years	IT
T6	M	Natural Resource Management	Master	Assistant Professor	7 Years	CART
T7	M	Rural Development and Agricultural Transformation	PhD	Assistant Professor	7 years	CART
T8	F	Geography	Master	Lecturer	3 Years	CSSH
T9	M	English	PhD	Assistant Professor	8 Years	CSSH
T10	F	Psychology	Master	Lecturer	6 Years	CSSH

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants

Participants	Sex	Department	Year	Participation in university affairs	Faculty/College
S1	F	Nursing	3rd	Class representative	CHMS
S2	M	Nursing	3rd	A member of a club	CHMS
S3	M	Physiology	2nd	Class representative	CHMS
S4	F	Pharmacy	4th	Class representative	CHMS
S5	M	Mechanical Engineering	4th	A member of a club	IT
S6	F	Hydraulics and Water Engineering	4th	Class representative	IT
S7	M	Natural Resource Management	2nd	Class representative	CART
S8	F	Natural Resource Management	3rd	No Participation	CART
S9	M	Geography	3rd	Class representative	CSSH
S10	F	English	3rd	A member of a club	CSSH
S11	M	Psychology	2nd	Class representative	CSSH
S12	F	English	2nd	No Participation	CSSH

Measures

The data were collected in two sequential phases. Firstly, data related to perceived academic freedom and student-centred approaches were collected from ten instructors and twelve students through a semi-structured interview. Secondly, participant observations were conducted to shed light on how instructors and students collaborate to implement the student-centred approach in the actual classroom. Combining the two data sources helped the researchers better understand how instructors' and students' academic freedom practically dictates the implantation of student-centred approaches.

Procedure

The data obtained through interviews were transcribed into Amharic and then translated into English. To avoid personal bias, two language experts who were not members of the research team did the translation. Two authors read the decoded data between lines to understand what was said by the interviewees (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2020). This helps researchers to code the data accordingly. Following a careful reading of codes, categories preceded by major themes were drawn out. Table 3 shows how we coded the data and developed themes and types.

Table 3. Sample Codes, Themes, and Categories

Codes	Themes	Categories
Staff meeting, meeting agenda, reflecting thoughts, misinterpretation of views, accommodation of views	Instructors' freedom to reflect their views at the institutional level	Freedom at the Institutional level
Participation, general meetings, decision making, and acknowledging voices, and revenge	Students' freedom to reflect their views at the institutional level	

Conducting research ethically and getting ethical clearance from a university to which a researcher is affiliated is vital. The researcher's experiences in the study context show it is not easy to enter a particular organisation to access research data unless the government initiates the research project. As a result, the researcher recognised all the bureaucratic procedures as usual and passed them patiently. However, getting permission from institutions does not guarantee access to all data from research participants, so the researcher attempts to secure individuals' voluntary participation by avoiding any psychological and physical harm. As much as possible, the researcher has tried to be reflexive and design strategies to protect individual research participants from different risks. To put research participants at ease, the researcher established a good rapport and made honest dialogue with them, believing it is imperative to uphold professional ethics such as avoiding plagiarism throughout the research report.

Therefore, before conducting my research, the researcher applied to the higher officials of Abay University for permission for entry. Then, potential research participants were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, and they were informed that confidentiality and anonymity are maintained and that they have the right to discontinue or refuse to participate in the study. Those who were willing to participate were asked to give written informed consent before data gathering. The researcher planned to share the study report with the participating university to ensure transparency and recognise its contribution to the successful accomplishments of the research project.

Results and Discussion

In this study, attempts have been made to comprehend how instructors and students perceive academic freedom and its impact on the realisation of student-centred approaches in the classrooms of Abay University. The university defines academic freedom as follows:

Academic freedom shall mean the right to discuss and openly express views on ideas, immediate national and global problems, and issues as well as other controversial matters in class, in connection with academic work on campus in discussion groups or print provided the expression of views is generally relevant to the subject under discussion and is consistent with rational and intellectual inquiry. (AU, 2013a, p. 206)

The themes generated following the data coding were organized into two categories, including freedom at the institutional level and freedom at the classroom level. These categories reflect how the notion of academic freedom in Abay University exercised at the classroom and institutional levels.

Freedom at the Institutional Level

Instructor's Freedom to Reflect Their Views at the Institutional Level.

Regarding the instructor's freedom to express their viewpoints in university-wide conferences, instructor participants reported the university organises only a few general meetings for the academic staff. An instructor participant (T10) mentioned that "the university organises joint annual conferences include research and education quality conferences." This restriction of expressing viewpoints also prevailed at the faculty/college level as expressed by an instructor participant:

Instructors also have a good relationship with the deans of colleges and faculties, but deans are not organising frequent staff meetings to discuss the teaching and learning process and other routines. Moreover, they do not conduct regular on-site visits. We requested our dean to call for a meeting since we had urgent issues...the university organises only a few general staff meetings annually. It is not enough to discuss recurrent institutional problems. Colleges and faculties should organise regular public staff meetings. T8

This point of view revealed that instructors had very few opportunities to express their feelings and concerns through formal channels. The data also revealed that the meetings at the university level that specifically focused on the teaching and learning process were few. Instructor participants complained that most of the general staff meetings were not intentionally organised for gathering instructors' views to solve recurring institutional problems but were conducted for the sake of reports. Instructor participants mentioned that some of the university-wide meetings were organised as per the direction of the Ministry of Education, adding that the university rarely organises general meetings to discuss national policies.

The instructor participants explained that instructors did not adequately raise issues when institutional-wide meetings were considered sensitive and crucial issues at the department level. In contrast, instructor participants reported that instructors could freely express their views in different meetings. However, the participant instructors still admitted that most of the instructors did not feel comfortable to comment about their bosses openly and critically and directly oppose their views other than taking their ideas as future directions. This idea was summed up by one of the instructor participants:

Superficially, instructors can unreservedly express their personal views during seminars and conferences, but I do not think instructors can confidently reflect on their thoughts since they do not feel comfortable commenting openly and critically on their bosses. There are cases in which instructors who often criticise their bosses receive adverse reactions. An instructor who explicitly forwards his/her concerns and critically evaluates his/her bosses in a general staff meeting would be considered a brave man/woman. T6

This idea is strengthened by the same instructor participant who stated:

Instructors, in principle, can reflect any ideas at different meetings regardless of their leader's commitment to accommodate their ideas and take immediate actions. Of course, instructors feel that academic leaders dislike those who regularly raise questions and forward comments at different meetings. T6

The above accounts indicate instructors are supposed to express their views freely regardless of other people's feelings, but in practical cases, it seemed that the freedom to share personal opinions with bosses in public was found to be limited. This shed light on the deeply rooted culture among instructors that expressing all personal feelings in public would damage a healthy relationship with others, including bosses. Scholars attribute students' freedom of expression in a classroom to the instructor's freedom at the institutional level. For instance, Mccrae (2011) argues that instructors could not value students' freedom of expression in the context where the instructor themselves are deprived of the right of free expression. This implies that in the classroom context of a higher education institution where academic freedom is lacking, students may have less chance of taking a central role in the teaching-learning process.

It was further pointed out that there were cases in which others might misinterpret the instructor's personal views in staff meetings. Hence, as reflected by instructor participants, instructors restrain themselves from reflecting their feelings for personal and/or political reasons. An instructor participant expressed it this way:

I know instructors can freely reflect their views at different academic meetings, but some instructors restrain from sharing their opinions with the audience by suspecting that the bosses would misinterpret their ideas. T3

The data further highlighted that raising all personal concerns in general staff meetings were perceived as nonsense. This was justified by instructor participants who disclosed that the university primarily accommodates ideas that best suit the need of the management bodies or ideas in line with the university's plan. A participant instructor explained:

Instructors can freely reflect their opinions at different meetings to discuss various issues, but higher officials decide most matters in advance. Hence, instructors developed a feeling that most sessions take place for the sake of formality rather than for accommodating instructors' views to the betterment of institutional practices. T2

Moreover, an instructor participant (T9) mentioned that "the university does not entertain and implement all the issues raised by instructors during meetings." Instructors rarely followed up, even ideas welcomed by the management bodies to see their ideas in practice. For this reason, instructors mostly prefer keeping silent to share their concerns and demands with the university management publically. Instructors are less likely to support a decision if they feel their ideas have been overlooked. This is an issue that leaders need to think of so that firm decisions are reached critically. As to student-centred approaches, the Abay University instructors seem excluded in deciding its implementation in every classroom other

than receiving pedagogical training to implement it as a non-negotiable change. It is wise to make instructors understand its value since they are most impacted by it.

Student's Freedom to Reflect Their Views at the Institutional Level.

During the interviews, some questions were directed concerning students' freedom to reflect on their views at the institutional level, and the interviewed students raised several ideas and concerns. Most argued that there were few opportunities to share their thoughts with the university administrative bodies; they felt the university fails to properly acknowledge their voices though the Senate Legislation of the university points out that students can "give suggestions in the preparation of by-laws, regulations, and directives about administrative matters as well as in the review and development of curricula" (AU, 2013a, p. 206). Despite this statement in the Senate Legislation, most of the manuals and policies of the university do not exclusively address students' freedom at the university level.

The student participants reported that the university does not organise regular meetings to discuss the teaching-learning process. Put differently, and the university arranged only a few general meetings to discuss different administrative and academic issues. One student participant (S4) mentioned that "when students come to the university for the first time, the administrators and academic leaders used to give information about the university. Otherwise, students rarely involve in decision making." The following student participants further supported this idea:

There are a few discussion forums that the university organises for students. The university calls for only one annual general meeting to welcome new students though there are recurring problems in the university that should be regularly discussed with students to bring about solutions. There is no discussion forum at the faculty level to raise questions and forward comments on the teaching and learning process. The cafeteria workers are not listening to the voices of students. S1

I can say there is no freedom to express personal views. There is no consecutive meeting organised for students to raise questions and forward comments except when we first arrived at the university to orient us about our duties and responsibilities. In the classroom, we never forward comment to the instructor except asking questions. S6

There are some meetings to discuss the teaching and learning process. But the university rarely organises meetings about service quality except a meeting that takes place when we first arrive at the university to introduce the services. In general, there are no regular meetings that the university organises for students. S1

The above viewpoints indicate that Abay University is good at providing new students with essential information to help them settle in promptly, and the orientation program seems to be well planned and organised for the benefit of students. However, students are seldom involved in the decision-making process during their university life. This means the university officials made decisions concerning students without including them in the decision-making process, and it is crucial to make students part of a solution that directly addresses their problems.

It was also revealed that the student's active participation in a meeting called by the management bodies was encouraging once they could participate. Student participants explained this active participation in asking questions and forwarding

comments regarding the quality of the university services. However, student participants complained that the university administrators did not acknowledge their voices and promptly solved the problems other than recording students' concerns and opinions during meetings. Hence, students are obliged to raise similar questions and complaints in different academic years; one student participant stated:

Officially, the university organises meetings for us to disclose the prevailing problems to different administrative bodies. The points we raised seem to be well noted by the meeting's chairperson, but the university does not practically solve these problems. In general, I want to claim that students are not fully experiencing their freedom as stated in different university guidelines. S12

Regarding the meeting agenda set by the university, most student participants disclosed they never attend meetings meant for students to discuss problems regarding the quality of classroom instruction in general and the performance of instructors in the presence of classroom instructors. It seems there is no culture of dialogue between students and instructors concerning the teaching and learning process. As one student participant (S1) explained, "no one organises a meeting for students to evaluate instructor's performance, but we only rank their performance via paper-based evaluation tools."

This implies that students evaluate the instructor's performance only through evaluation checklists distributed in the classroom by the head of the department and sometimes by an individual instructor. This contrasts with a student participant's viewpoint that different university offices, including the president's office, welcome students as they want to share their complaints. On this, student participants further expressed that the heads of departments encouraged students to freely share their concerns about the teaching and learning process through students did not voluntarily do so because of the fear of receiving bad grades as revenge from instructors who got negative feedback from students. Referring to an instructor with this kind of adverse reaction, a student participant said:

I remember when the university administrative bodies invited me to discuss the teaching and learning process as a class representative. Most class representatives prefer to keep silent in that meeting, but the chairman frequently requested us to forward any questions and suggestions regarding the teaching and learning process. Consequently, my friend raised his complaint regarding an instructor who was an autocrat and rude to her students. On the following day of the meeting, this instructor came to the class and complained about the student's feedback that she received through the head of the department. At the end of the semester, she prepared for a very tough examination which caused many students to fail her course. S7

The interviewee justifies students' everyday experiences in which their instructors abused students—as a result, sharing their concerns regarding the teaching and learning process in a classroom.

Students had few opportunities to reflect their views and concerns in official meetings concerning the quality of services and the university's teaching and

learning process let students evaluate the instructor's performance based on evaluations tools. The university did not promptly solve students' problems, making students perceive the university had failed to acknowledge their concerns. Furthermore, students did not exercise their freedom to officially complain about the instructor's quality since they were afraid of the adverse reactions from individual instructors.

Freedom at the Classroom Level

Instructor's Freedom at the Classroom Level. When instructors were asked to detail their freedom to express personal views in the classroom, most mentioned they did not personally face challenges to express personal opinions. In other words, instructors can freely express their ideas in the classroom if they support their arguments with scientific knowledge rather than personal judgments. There was also some level of practice in the classroom wherein instructors could freely criticise government policies though they believe that instructors, as scholars, had to be officially entitled to reflect personal views. An instructor participant (T3) expressed that 'instructors do not feel confident to openly share their viewpoints about national policies and criticise them as well in the classroom.' Instructor participants stressed that classroom instructors did not feel free to share their concerns with students about the prevailing gaps of the nationally harmonised curriculum, let alone criticising national-level policies. This idea was also strengthened by an instructor who explained:

In the classroom, I do not think instructors have the freedom to promote ideas that are antagonistic to government policies. I know what the consequence would be if a student informed some concerned bodies about the case. T8

More importantly, the interview indicated that the freedom of criticising government policies was restricted because of political reasons. The study data further revealed that instructors who were teaching courses that, by their nature, related to political affairs and government policies, did not freely express their views as they were afraid that students might misinterpret their ideas. The university itself officially declares that instructors should avoid imposing their own political beliefs and opinions on students (AU, 2013b).

While reflecting on instructors' and students' freedom to design courses collaboratively, many participants explained that let alone negotiate the course contents with their students. They do not have the right to select course contents unless they officially discuss the case with the department council. In contrast, a reviewed document of the Abay University states, "an academic staff of the university shall design, develop, and implement courses in an area of specialisation following established university procedures..." (AU, 2013b, p. 25). Teaching course contents prescribed by a concerned body other than instructors and students would result in teaching focused on outcomes that may suppress the sharing of innovative ideas between an instructor and their students (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002). Concerning this, one of the instructor participants asserted that:

The curricula of undergraduate programs are nationally harmonised. I informally heard that instructors could only revise ten percent of the course content. Instructors can add some content to a course if it is convincing, but instructors cannot remove it. T10

Instructors have only some levels of freedom to modify the contents of undergraduate curricula since these curricula are nationally harmonised. I do not know precisely to what extent we can adjust the contents. We wish to make significant changes to the contents, but we are afraid to do so. T8

Another instructor participant further explained this based on his personal experience:

I came to know irrelevant contents included in the course that I am delivering, but I have no right to avoid these contents unless I get permission from the department. However, it is possible to add new content to the course syllabus freely. T14

As revealed in the classroom observations, it is worth noting that instructors did not discuss the course contents with their students, which violates an assumption in the constructivist approaches that as students negotiate with instructors about course contents, it is more likely they will take responsibility for their learning (Vrasidas, 2000). This would provide instructors with limited scope to freely redesign their course syllabus. They did not have the autonomy to remove content perceived as unimportant though they had the right to add relevant and contemporary content related to the course. So, instructors are expected to teach classes based on the syllabus they developed in line with a particular curriculum, but they seem to have the freedom to broaden the contents without deviating much from the fundamental essence of the course. In an education system where “a national curriculum is tightly defined..., instructors may find themselves ‘teaching to the test’ using a teacher-centred approach” (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002, p. 46). Concerning this, an instructor participant (T2) pointed out that “if instructors have strong justification for adding some contents in the existing course syllabus, they can do that in consultation with the concerned bodies.”

Nonetheless, an instructor’s freedom to redesign course contents is constrained by the nationally harmonised curricula developed by the curriculum experts and the team of professionals. This seems to be intentionally enforced so the concerned government bodies have “a higher degree of control and standardisation than a more autonomous curriculum model would permit” (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002, p. 13). Briggs and Sommerfeldt also noted that regardless of the national curriculum framework supposedly guiding the teaching and learning process, an instructor’s quality plays an immense role in bringing about quality instruction in a classroom.

The instructor participants did not deny they had the right to plan and implement a wide range of teaching methods and assessment techniques to fill perceived gaps of teaching and assessment methods proposed by the curriculum experts. Marzano (2007) argued that an individual instructor should determine the teaching strategies by considering different factors, including the type of students and the time available for the lesson. In this concern, the interview with

participating instructors further revealed that instructors had the freedom to change the mode of delivery proposed by the curriculum as far as they found it essential. No one, including the department head, imposed teaching methods specified in the curriculum as the only teaching strategies. Their views, in this regard, were well represented by the following viewpoints:

Instructors are free to use any kind of teaching method. The university does not set restrictions on the way instructors teach courses in the classroom if the methods they choose suit them. T2

Instructors can exercise some freedom in the teaching and learning process unless they have personal fear. They can freely use a range of teaching methodologies and add new contents to the existing course syllabus, but they cannot avoid course contents proposed by the curriculum. T3

As far as they believe the methodologies effectively deliver the lesson, all instructors are privileged to plan and employ different teaching methods ... We sometimes give cases for students to discuss. However, most students may not participate unless instructors compel them to participate. T10

The freedom bestowed upon instructors by the university to use various teaching approaches provides an impetus for them to plan different active learning approaches. An instructor participant stated it this way:

Academic freedom, to some extent, contributes to the implementation of the student-centred approach in the classroom. For instance, it provides a chance for instructors to plan different teaching approaches flexibly. However, students do not like their instructors to stay for a long time in the classroom, and they dislike strict instructors and teach courses as per the syllabus. Students want to keep silent in the school. There are cases in which instructors push students for a prompt response to their questions. This might be a result of students' previous learning trends. Forcing students to answer and ask questions is like denying freedom to them.... hence, instructors get discouraged from making the lesson student-centred. T8

This was also reflected in the collection of artefacts. The reviewed course syllabus, for instance, confirmed that instructors have the right to plan a range of active learning approaches. The Senate Legislation of AU also states, "the university is...duty-bound to enact rules and regulations governing the academic right, freedoms, and responsibilities of its staff" (AU, 2013a, p.10). In contrast, the data collected through classroom observations revealed that instructors did not practically use their freedom and used a range of active learning methods. An instructor participant pointed out:

There is the freedom to employ various teaching methodologies, but instructors mostly use the lecture method to take much of the class time. Sometimes instructors try to use varied active learning approaches, but students are unwilling to participate. T5

As clearly indicated in the above script, one can confidently infer that the freedom to plan different active learning approaches was not guaranteed to adopt student-centred approaches in the classroom successfully. In other words, though

instructors have the freedom to teach as they plan, they predominately use the lecture method except when forwarding questions at the end of the lesson and sometimes requiring students to do group assignments.

Student's Freedom at the Classroom Level

While reflecting on students' freedom of expression of personal viewpoints in the classroom, instructor participants stated that classroom instructors encourage students to express their views on debatable issues.

Instructor participants stressed that higher learning institutions should argue, generate new ideas, and hold diverse views on different classroom issues. There were pragmatic responses to the question related to student's freedom of expression and discussion in the classroom, as these instructors explained:

We, instructors, give our students freedom to participate and provide direction to discuss and debate. Students will be active learners if instructors provide them with a chance and guidance to participate. T1

There is a course named 'seminar' in which students can discuss and argue on some topics. Moreover, I sometimes provide students with assignments and give chances for them to present their works. T9

In the classroom, I give students the freedom to debate sensitive issues, which would help them develop their decision-making skills. Of course, not all classes invite students to discuss with each other. T2

These viewpoints indicate that instructors recognise the significance of the student's freedom of expression in the classroom and attempt to let students reflect their views. Concurrently, freedom of discussion and expression in every classroom was highlighted in different institutional documents. In this context, the 'instructor's handbook,' for instance, stated "through contact with students for teaching purposes, an academic staff member has the right to promote and permit an atmosphere of free, rational, and dispassionate inquiry concerning issues relevant to the subject matter of the course..." (AU, 2013b, p. 24). Such a statement reveals that students have the right to enjoy a classroom environment wherein they can reflect their views during their interaction with instructors and other students. In contrast, it was disclosed from the interviews with instructors that most students keep silent when instructors ask questions. On this issue, an instructor participant (T7) mentioned, "I know there could be students who have the correct answer about my questions, but they would be afraid to answer them." This was justified by instructor participants who expressed that most of their students are afraid of the adverse reactions from instructors when they give wrong answers, so it is suggested that "instructors must create a learning environment in which learners "feel free to answer a question, knowing that there will be no cost to them if they are wrong" (Michael & Modell, 2003, p. 96). Otherwise, "instructors' efforts to try to get students to reflect ... [will be] easily undermined by instructors' authority and formal power, which intimidates students programmed to seek correct answers" (Senge, 2010, p. 139). On this issue, instructor participants explained by saying:

We instructors do not react to students' wrong and unrelated answers, and some students may laugh at a student when they give irrelevant answers. It would have been better to appreciate students' participation and provide constrictive feedback afterward, which would enhance students' tendency to participate in subsequent sessions. Instructors can boost the confidence of their students to participate by creating a friendly and conducive classroom environment. T2

I used to claim that complexity of the topics induced passivity among students. But, one day, I intentionally asked students a trivial question. However, all students keep silent. This gave me a clue that students are either afraid or lose interest in participating in the classroom. My students should know that I am asking questions not to frustrate them but to adjust my instructional approaches to improve learning. T10

The above points indicate that students abstained from answering questions since they were afraid instructors may negatively react. This was also evident from student participants' responses that some instructors may raise questions instead of answering their questions. Student participants seemed to agree that some instructors gave them opportunities to pose questions though they still felt disheartened by instructors' hostile reactions. As a result, a student participant (S4) asserted that "most of the students prefer referring books to raise questions for their instructors to understand points that were not clear to them during a lesson." Other student participants further confirmed the above viewpoints:

Since some instructors show irritating faces when asked by students, students feel that all instructors may do the same. As a result, students think unease to raise questions for their instructors, and they prefer to listen to what the instructor is saying rather than asking questions. Even we choose not to respond when instructors orally ask questions. S12

There is...an issue of freedom. When students are afraid of asking questions in the classroom, they refer to books in the library to find answers. Instructors may invite students to ask questions, but they do not show a welcoming face when students forward questions. Most students then fail to ask questions since they are afraid of the unfriendly approaches of instructors. S7

Concerning academic freedom in the classroom, I can say that it is so poor. I prefer not to ask my instructors questions since some consider my questions silly, and they do not encourage me to ask them again. When I ask questions, instructors themselves raise questions instead of answering my questions. S1

Some instructors encourage students who participate in the classroom. At the same time, some instructors do not like to be asked by students. They do not show a welcoming face for students to ask. It seems that these instructors expect students to be silent and listen to what they are saying. This deprives my freedom to ask. S10

The data further suggested that students' freedom to raise questions was attributed to the classroom instructor's behaviour. In other words, a student's academic freedom depends on their relationship with their instructors. On this issue, one student participant (S2) pointed out, "it is difficult to say whether students have freedom or not in the classroom. It depends on individual instructor's behaviour." As reported by student participants, there were several occasions when students did not feel at ease speaking and raising questions to the instructors

who had an unfriendly approach. The classroom observations also confirmed this. For example, some instructors in the observed classrooms were friendly to their students and invited them to reflect their views, but some looked harsh and unreceptive to students' ideas. In the latter cases, students were not airing their opinions and concerns. This contrasts with the assumption that best teaching is characterised by the perceived freedom of students to learn (Brown & Atkins, 1988).

While specifically reflecting on their freedom to comment on an instructor's view or their way of teaching, student participants revealed that students could not freely give comments on lessons in the classroom, one of the student participants (S6) explained "students never forward comments for their instructors unless their instructors request them to do so." Student participants also revealed that instructors rarely give a chance for students to provide them with feedback. This idea was further strengthened by student participants who stated:

Students usually are afraid of giving comments unless they force each student to provide comments. I know, in principle, students can express their views. But, starting from the lower grades, we do not have the experience to comment on our instructors. This is what we developed in the lower grades. We may give comments to instructors through a classroom representative. When we comment on instructors through our representatives' instructors may still be angry at us. In general, we lack the experience to give a face to face comments to instructors. S3

I never comment on my instructor, even if they teach something wrong. How could I interrupt the lesson and give comments to my instructor unless they invited me to comment? I know the university administration will favour instructors if conflict happens between students and instructors. Moreover, students may laugh at the student who argued with instructors. I do not think instructors need students to express all that they feel. If a student disagrees and argues with an instructor about the proposed answers of an examination, the instructor may think that the student undermines them. In such circumstances, a student may fail to express his idea confidently. S2

The above accounts highlight those students do not freely comment on the instructor's views and their ways of teaching; students give feedback only if their instructor pointedly asks an individual student to do so. Students felt the instructors did not duly acknowledge their comments, and they got little opportunity to comment on a lesson. Concurrently, the lesson observations showed that the students receive information from their classroom instructors without questioning its validity. For instance, an instructor delivered a lecture about 'professional ethics in one observed classroom.' The instructor displayed and incorrectly said 'paid vocation' during this lesson instead of 'paid vacation.' Surprisingly, none of the students commented on this. This also suggests there is not a culture of forwarding comments to instructors. A student participant (S6) commented, "students fail to participate because of lack of freedom to express personal views and argue with instructors." In such conditions, it is impossible to realise student-centred approaches in the classrooms of Abay University. The classroom observations confirmed that some instructors looked angry at the whole class when they heard voices. Generally, student participants felt most of their instructors failed to

accommodate students' ideas adequately, and they thought they had been deprived of their academic freedom in the classroom. In this concern, an instructor participant witnessed:

Every student is interested in reflecting their views, but the instructor's approach matters most to reflect their ideas freely. Some instructors recognise students' ideas regardless of their English language skills, which enhances students' participation in the classroom. Of course, some students are so fearful and shy of their instructors and classmates. T1

The above interviewee seems convinced there could be students willing to respond to instructors' questions when instructors establish a good rapport with their students. This is in line with Schein's (2004) assertion that organisational culture is "the most critical factor determining the success or failures of an organisation" (as cited in Arifin, Troena, Djumahir, & Rahayu, 2014, p. 22). It was also found that there were few occasions in the classroom for students and instructors to discuss their common concerns. As revealed in the classroom observations, the researcher noticed a conversation between an instructor and a class representative.

Instructor: *Why do not you ask questions? Why do not you answer my questions as well? I am allowing you to do so.*

Student: *Instructor...most students are interested in asking and answering questions, but most of us are afraid of asking and answering questions since students mock each other's mistakes.*

This dialogue delivered a message that students felt there was no such classroom environment to ask and answer questions freely. It was also evident from the conversation that students failed to freely express their views and concerns in the class due to the risk of an embarrassment of reflecting on something that other students may perceive as wrong. This idea was supported by a student (S2) who said, "I worry that my questions might be silly for other students which would, in turn, make them laugh at and undermine me." As viewed by student participants, this makes students restrained from active participation due to being demoralised for giving wrong responses. This contrasts with the articulated Senate Legislation of the Abay University, stating that students have the right to "participate in a free exchange of ideas in an open academic environment" (AU, 2013, p. 206). To create an environment in which students feel emotionally safe, it is essential to establish "trusting relationships between students and instructors, and among students...to do this, professors lead by example by listening to students and treating them with both respect and compassion" (Soltis, 2015, p. 28). Concerning this, student participants pointed out the immense role of the classroom instructors in establishing a conducive classroom environment that supports students to express their views freely. On this, a participant instructor explained:

Instructors can boost the confidence of their students to participate by creating a friendly and conducive classroom environment. Moreover, instructors should credit the participation of students since it would enhance the tendency of students to experience. T2

Further, a participant instructor provided a response based on his personal experiences:

Since students mostly worry that their colleagues will laugh at them if they give wrong answers, I usually make students aware that making mistakes is nothing, and mistakes are part of learning. When students restrain from reflecting on their views, I switch the lesson to questioning and answering. I also appreciate students who actively participate in the classroom. T1

The above accounts indicate that institutional policies and guidelines that state the freedom of expression do not assure such freedom in the classroom. Instead, students' freedom of expression is in the hands of their instructors. In this concern, McCrae (2011) stated that academic freedom in higher education is not moulded so much by existing education laws and regulations but by the thoughts and behaviours of all students and academic staff. The above account also stipulates that instructors are considered accountable for building a class environment where students' views are welcomed. Otherwise, having a harsh classroom environment would instill fear among students. Students' active participation in the classroom would be impossible unless they are courageous to answer questions and express their feelings. On this, student participants also commented that most of the instructors were not authorising students to reflect personal views since they perceived the students had no pre-knowledge about the topic being taught. Students had no option other than to accept all the information without questioning in such a classroom context.

As reported by student participants, the poor participation of students was also caused by a deep-rooted prejudice that was frequently forwarding comments and posing challenging questions to instructors would lead students to receive poor grades. Concerning this, a student participant (S5) pointed out, "most students suspect that an instructor will reduce marks if they challenge him/her in the classroom." Other students strengthened this point of view:

We knew that students have the right to raise questions and reflect personal views in the classroom. However, most students think that the instructor may reduce their marks if they pose questions to an instructor. Some students ended up getting hurt emotionally. I stop raising questions to my instructors in the classroom. S3

Since students are afraid of their instructors, they do not like to ask questions. Students believe that if they ask questions repeatedly in the classroom, the instructor may give them an "F" grade as an act of revenge. S6

I abstain from forwarding comments to my instructor in the classroom even though they made serious and apparent errors while teaching a topic. It is challenging to give comments to instructors since I am afraid that the instructor may get revenge on me. S11

The above excerpts indicate that students are aware of having the right to forward personal viewpoints and ask questions though they perceive that instructors who have been frequently requested and commented on by students would take revenge by giving them a bad grade. This hinders students from sharing their views and concerns with their instructors. If students fear getting poor grades, they may unreasonably keep silent while their instructors make apparent mistakes in delivering their lessons. In such circumstances, students fail to achieve the specific learning objectives set for a particular class.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Action

As to the students' freedom to express personal views at the classroom level, the analysis shows that instructors tried to provide some opportunities for students to ask and answer questions. However, most of the students did not freely participate since they were afraid of the negative reaction from instructors and the embarrassment of reflecting on something that other students may perceive as wrong. Student participants felt most of their instructors did not acknowledge their ideas and felt deprived of their academic freedom in the classroom. A deep-rooted prejudice that frequently forwarded comments and posed challenging questions to the classroom instructors would lead to poor grades from their instructors. Such situations cannot be reversed unless instructors encourage students to participate in questioning and answering and reflect their personal views (Michael & Modell, 2003). Instructors need to recognise a student's freedom in the classroom as noteworthy. This would motivate students to generate new and diverse ideas.

Students' freedom to reflect their views was found to connect with individual classroom instructors' behaviour, implying that students' freedom in the classroom is in the hands of their instructors. Creating a friendly and welcoming classroom environment helps instructors to enhance active participation among students. It should be noted that the freedom that students experience in the classroom would contribute to effective classroom instruction (Brown & Atkins, 1988; Soltis, 2015). Based on the above conclusion, the following recommendations were forwarded to academic leaders and instructors.

Last but not least, academic freedom seems to be hierarchical. The university leadership allows academic freedom based on the freedom given to them by the highest education authority. The highest authority of education allows academic freedom based on the government's level of freedom. Therefore, this is reflected when looking at the academic freedom given to instructors and students. While this showed a vital influence on this university case, other factors like culture and social structure are undoubtedly hindering factors in the proper practice of academic freedom in the Ethiopian higher education system.

Recommendations for Academic Leaders

It is recommended that the academic leaders make students aware of their freedom of speech in the classroom, and the level to which instructors give freedom

for their students should be included as a criterion in the instructor's performance evaluation checklist. The university needs to promote a culture that values mutual understanding and authentic discourse between instructors and students and instructors regardless of their academic and administrative status.

Recommendations for Instructors

Instructors should employ two-way communication in the classroom to help them effectively share their knowledge with students. They should also make the class participatory by using various teaching methods that accommodate diversity in the classroom and put exact assessment mechanisms.

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