



Exploring the challenges of university council independence in Ghana's higher education architecture

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges of university council independence in Ghana's public universities, prompted by proposed legislative reforms increasing government oversight. The study is anchored on the principal-agent theory. Using an exploratory qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 key informants, including government, faculty members, non-faculty members, and student representatives from Ghana's five oldest public universities. Thematic and document analysis revealed that government influence, through regulatory constraints, financial control, and appointment powers, restricts council autonomy. It is proposed that independent funding boards must be created to monitor the flow of funding, which will lessen dependency on government subsidies. Public-private partnership initiatives, which encourage industrial partnerships to finance infrastructure and research, should be promoted. To ensure fair representation and diminish political influence, public universities must set clear guidelines for council appointees. Additionally, efforts should be made to implement fee regulation mechanisms, such as limiting tuition hikes and expanding student scholarship opportunities, particularly under increased university autonomy. By highlighting the necessity of striking a balance between autonomy and accountability, these findings contribute to the global discourse on higher education governance.

Keywords: Autonomy, Academic Freedom, Government Influence, Higher Education Governance, New Public Management, Public University, University Council Independence

I. INTRODUCTION

The power of governing councils to make decisions without outside interference, especially from the government or other stakeholders, is known as university council independence. Academic freedom, the privilege granted to faculty and students to pursue knowledge without undue interference, and universities' capacity to self-regulate in academic, administrative, and financial matters are closely linked to this independence, which is a crucial component of effective higher education governance (Kudal & Dawar, 2020; Thenmozhi & Sasidharan, 2020). These interconnected concepts are crucial for encouraging innovation, guaranteeing academic achievement, and empowering universities to adjust to local and international trends.

Independent councils enhance institutional performance worldwide by providing unbiased oversight, reducing conflicts of interest, and guiding strategic decisions that promote long-term sustainability (Thakolwiroj & Sithipolvanichgul, 2021). Universities that value autonomy and use market-oriented governance systems, like the University of Oxford, are more flexible and competitive on a worldwide scale (Hudayberdiyev, 2024).

However, there are significant barriers to the independence of Ghanaian public university councils due to interference from the government, especially in the areas of budget management and council member nominations. Between 70 and 80 percent of public university budgets are funded by government subsidies, and the government appoints 36 percent of council members, including the chairperson (Appiagyei-Atuah, 2021). Their capacity to pursue autonomous intellectual and strategic objectives is restricted by this framework, which frequently synchronises council decisions with political agendas. By advocating for greater government involvement on councils, the 2020 Public University Bill, which the erstwhile government made an attempt to introduce, exacerbated these reservations by potentially giving the state more authority over employment, admissions, and outside partnerships (Appiagyei-Atuah, 2021). Excessive interference can restrict academic freedom, impede innovation, and decrease institutional adaptability, even though government oversight can guarantee accountability and align universities with national development goals, such as increasing Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) enrolment to support economic growth (Westerheijden, 2018).



1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although government meddling in university governance is not exclusive to Ghana, it is more noticeable in underdeveloped countries where state-centered governance frameworks are more common (Arikewuyo & Ilusanya, 2010). However, wealthy nations like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom frequently use hybrid models that strike a balance between consultative government functions and a high degree of institutional autonomy, enabling universities to flourish in tough international settings (Westerheijden, 2018).

Ghana should take inspiration from South Africa's governance model, which combines a variety of endowment and industrial partnership funding sources (Mzenzi, 2022). Ghanaian university councils desire autonomy to advance academic and institutional objectives, but the government expects them to maximise public funds. These disputes are made worse by government appointments and financial reliance, which restrict council autonomy.

Few studies have examined the unique difficulties of council independence in African contexts, despite earlier research concentrating on governance in wealthier countries. This is especially true in light of recent legal reforms (Appiagyei-Atuah, 2021; David, et al., 2018). The challenges of university council independence, particularly the ramifications of the 2020 Public University Bill, are the primary focus of this paper.

The findings support governance models that seek to increase council autonomy while preserving accountability in order to guide policy improvements in Ghana. The study also contributes to our understanding of how to foster innovative, autonomous, and successful higher education systems by providing suggestions to other developing countries dealing with comparable issues.

1.2 Research Objective

The study sought to explore the challenges of university council independence in Ghana.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

A solid framework for analysing governance concerns at Ghanaian public universities, particularly the disputes over university council authority, is provided by Jensen and Meckling's (1976) Principal-Agent Theory. The theory holds that there are conflicts of interest between principals (like the government or stakeholders that support institutions) and agents (like university councils and management in charge of institutional operations).

Principals strive for efficient resource utilisation and alignment with national ambitions like expanding STEM enrolment or infrastructure development, whereas agents prioritise institutional goals like academic innovation or faculty welfare. These competing objectives could lead to agency problems, where agents act against the principals' expectations, like breaking regulations meant to safeguard academic freedom (Muhanguzi, 2019).

The government, as the principal, has a major influence in Ghana through a number of means, including financial control (70 to 80 percent of university budgets), regulatory mandates through the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), and the appointment of council members (36 percent of council seats, including the chairperson) (Education Regulatory Bodies Act, of 2020). Given that they force councils (agents) to obey state agendas, these procedures result in agency conflicts by limiting their capacity to prioritise institutional needs or innovate. For example, GTEC's enrolment limitations limit councils' ability to align student enrolment to institutional capability, and according to council minutes, government appointees initiated 40% of policy proposals between 2020 and 2024. Choices about national priorities may also be influenced by these chairpersons.

Empirical evidence lends credit to the fact that the conflict between the agent and principal can be reduced through the adoption of Corporate Governance Practices (CGPs). Sopta, et al. (2017) found that board independence in Croatian public institutions reduced agency expenses by aligning agent behaviours with principal aims. Similarly, Vargas-Hernandez and Teodoro Cruz (2018) demonstrated how effective monitoring by CGPs at Megacable, Mexico, decreased agency expenses. Muhanguzi (2019) showed how principal-agent conflicts were lessened in Ugandan savings and credit cooperatives through performance review. These conclusions hold for Ghanaian universities, where CGPs such as independent funding boards, open selection processes, and performance-based evaluations could increase council autonomy, reduce governmental control, and align institutional goals with stakeholder expectations.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Models of Governance in Higher Education Institutions

The three most prominent university governance models are the market-oriented, self-governance, and state-centered approaches (Abdeldayem & Aldulaimi, 2018; Ramírez & Tejada, 2018). The market-oriented model, also known as the entrepreneurial school, emphasises efficient resource management through professional leadership and corporate strategies (Abdeldayem & Aldulaimi, 2018; Ramírez & Tejada, 2018; Tohidyan Far et al., 2024;



Hudayberdiyev, 2024). While it promotes operational effectiveness, careful oversight is necessary to prevent over-commercialisation and protect academic standards (Lavanya, 2024).

The self-governance model entrusts academic staff with institutional leadership, emphasising academic autonomy, peer review, truth-seeking, and societal contribution (Hudayberdiyev, 2024). In the state-centered model, the government exercises control over university management while allowing limited autonomy. This model is prevalent in Ghana and much of Africa, where the state's role has evolved from direct control to ensuring responsible university operations through intermediary agencies (Tohidyan Far et al., 2024; Nabaho, 2022). Given the strengths and weaknesses of each model, a hybrid governance approach is recommended to balance autonomy, accountability, and educational quality across institutions (Lavanya, 2024).

2.2.2 Council Autonomy and Academic Freedom in Higher Education Institutions

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are intrinsically linked, often described as Siamese twins, with academic freedom being deeply embedded in autonomous institutions (Hao, 2025; Edmore, 2016). Academic freedom fosters creativity and independent thinking, enabling students, academics, and researchers to generate new knowledge without external interference (Bakaradze, 2023). In universities, this freedom must be protected to allow intellectuals to operate without censorship, particularly from government entities (Bakaradze, 2023; Hasan, 2025).

Institutional autonomy refers to the extent to which universities can govern themselves, especially in relation to government regulation, external funding, and partnerships with industry and international bodies (Quyet, et al., 2023; Matei & Iwinska, 2014). A key structure supporting autonomy is the university council, which oversees institutional management, including assets, finances, and policy decisions (Mzenzi, 2022). Councils typically include both internal members (academic staff, students, administrators) and external members (government and private sector representatives, and sometimes international experts) to enhance governance perspectives (Mzenzi, 2022; Westerheijden, 2018).

Globally, influenced by New Public Management (NPM) principles, there is a trend toward increasing the number of external members in university councils. This approach aligns with corporate governance ideals, promoting objectivity and strategic oversight (Kohtamaki & Balbachevsky, 2018; Mzenzi, 2022). Autonomy enables universities to manage their internal affairs such as staffing, academic programmes, infrastructure, and research without excessive state control, thereby improving the quality of education (Quyet et al., 2023; David et al., 2018). Balanced autonomy ensures shared governance among stakeholders, including government, faculty, students, and councils, enhancing institutional effectiveness (Hao, 2025). Despite these ideals, many African universities still face limited autonomy due to strong government influence. State authorities often retain control over critical aspects such as council appointments, tuition regulation, quality assurance, and enrolment targets, thus undermining independent governance (Arikewuyo & Ilusanya, 2010; Mzenzi, 2022; Hao, 2025).

2.2.3 University Council Independence Context in Ghana

In Ghana, public universities are governed by councils responsible for legislative, administrative, and oversight functions, as outlined in university acts (Appiagyei-Atuah, 2021; Effah & Mensah-Bonsu, 2001). A typical council comprises the Vice-Chancellor, two convocation representatives, one representative each from alumni, organised labour, academic staff, and the Students' Representative Council, and four government appointees, including the chairperson. Approximately 36% of council members are government-appointed, giving the state significant influence despite not holding a numerical majority (Appiagyei-Atuah, 2021). This composition aims to balance internal and external perspectives, with government appointees often including business and industry representatives to enhance strategic decision-making.

Historically, Ghana's university autonomy has evolved. Pre-1992, the President appointed Vice-Chancellors and served as Chancellor, exerting direct control. The 1992 Constitution shifted authority to councils, but government influence persists through appointee selection and policy directives on tuition, enrollment, and quality assurance (Arikewuyo & Ilusanya, 2010). The government appoints the chairpersons of state corporations, including public universities, thereby undermining the independence of university governing bodies. Public universities' financial independence is threatened by the current legal framework, which prevents them from autonomously determining and setting academic programme fees (Ayam, 2019; Faakye, 2020).

Again, the 2020 Public University Bill, which was put on hold by the previous government, proposed increasing government representation, potentially amplifying control over admissions, appointments, and external partnerships (Appiagyei-Atuah, 2021). This context underscores the tension between government oversight and council autonomy, which undermines fiscal responsibility and academic innovation. Unlike models in developed nations, such as the market-oriented governance at the University of Oxford, Ghana's state-centered approach limits institutional flexibility (Hudayberdiyev, 2024).

III.METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design (EQD) to investigate the complexities of university council autonomy in Ghana's public higher education system. The research team ensured a comprehensive analysis of governance dynamics in a context where government actions have a substantial impact by using EQD's flexibility to iteratively refine the study as new information became available (Saunders et al., 2016).

This approach is particularly well-suited for gathering the complex, situation-specific perspectives of council members and producing rich, qualitative data on the challenges of council autonomy, claim Bradshaw, et al. (2017). By prioritising the opinions of participants, EQD made it possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of how government influence affects university governance, which is consistent with the study's objective of guiding policy improvements.

Throughout the investigation, the research team used reflexivity to address potential researcher bias. The researchers admitted that, as scholars connected to Ghanaian universities, they might have preconceived notions about the role of the government in higher education. Regular team meetings and reflective notes, which documented how individual viewpoints might affect data gathering or interpretation, helped to sustain reflexivity. During data analysis, these notes were examined to make sure the conclusions were based on participant responses rather than assumptions.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were combined with document analysis of university acts and the 2020 Public University Bill draft as part of triangulation to increase objectivity. This allowed for cross-verification of findings and decreased the possibility of bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.2 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 council members from Ghana's five oldest public universities: the University of Ghana (UG), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), University of Cape Coast (UCC), University of Education, Winneba (UEW), and University for Development Studies (UDS). These institutions were chosen due to their well-established governance structures, which guarantee representativeness by being comparable to those of other public universities in Ghana.

The sample consisted of six people from each university: two government representatives, two convocation faculty representatives, one non-academic staff person, and one student representative. This composition ensured a variety of perspectives from key stakeholders in university governance.

To ensure their competence and relevance to the study's goals, participants who were actively involved in university council operations were chosen through the use of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2018). A transparent procedure was used to identify participants in order to reduce selection bias: lists of current council members were obtained from university registries, and selection criteria gave preference to those who had served on the council for at least two years in order to guarantee familiarity with governance procedures.

Although they were taken into consideration, alternative sampling techniques like snowball sampling were judged less suitable because of the possibility of over-representing coupled networks. Purposive sampling, on the other hand, made it possible to purposefully include a variety of roles (government, academic, staff, and students), thereby capturing a wide range of perspectives.

After reaching data saturation, when no new themes or insights surfaced from further interviews, a sample size of 30 individuals was established (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Iterative transcript evaluations conducted during data gathering served as confirmation of this. A strong representation of viewpoints throughout Ghana's public university system was guaranteed by the inclusion of six delegates from each university, each of whom represented a different stakeholder group.

A thorough understanding of council dynamics was made possible by the variety of roles played by government officials with policy influence, academically trained faculty, operationally savvy personnel, and students as beneficiaries. This methodology is in line with the principles of qualitative research, where the richness and depth of data, rather than just the quantity, are used to determine the appropriate sample size (Patton, 2018).

Open-ended questions like "How does government influence impact council decision-making?" and "What are the primary challenges to achieving council autonomy?" were included in the interview guide. Five council members (one from each university, not in the final sample) participated in a pilot test to improve the guide, resolve any ambiguities in the question wording, and make sure it was in line with the goals of the study.

Overly general questions were reworded to produce more focused responses in light of pilot feedback. One example was the simplification of "Describe governance challenges" to "What specific barriers hinder council autonomy?" With the consent of the participants, audio recordings of the approximately 60-minute interviews were made. Depending on their preferences, interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person. The 2020 Public University



Bill draft and document analysis of university acts supplemented the interview data with contextual evidence of legal and policy consequences on governance.

3.3 Ethical Consideration

Careful attention was paid to ethical issues. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Cape Coast granted ethical approval. After being fully told about the study's objectives, confidentiality procedures, and withdrawal rights, participants gave their signed informed consent.

Pseudonyms were used to preserve privacy, and specific institutional or regional information was removed from study locations to de-identify them. In order to build trust and promote candid communication, interview dates were modified to take into account participants' availability.

The trustworthiness of this qualitative study was ensured by employing strategies to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was raised using triangulation, which paired semi-structured interviews with document analysis to bolster findings. For instance, the participants' reports of government influence were contrasted with provisions in university acts and the 2020 Public University Bill draft. Member checking was done by giving participants interview summaries in order to confirm interpretations and make sure the findings reflected their opinions.

Thick description was used to facilitate transferability, including thorough explanations of the five universities' governance structures, participant roles, and research background. This makes it possible for readers to evaluate how well the results translate to different contexts, such as other university systems in Africa. By keeping a thorough audit trail that documented all research stages, interview protocols, coding systems, and thematic analysis procedures, reliability was guaranteed. These documents were examined by an outside qualitative researcher to ensure methodological coherence.

The research team used reflexivity to address confirmability, recording their presumptions and possible biases in reflective notes. The team's academic ties, for instance, were seen as a possible source of bias, and measures like peer debriefing and triangulation were employed to preserve objectivity. Thematic analysis using NVivo software further guaranteed a methodical and open coding process, improving confirmability.

3.4 Data Analysis and Presentation

To find trends and aspects pertaining to university council autonomy, thematic analysis was used to examine the data. To fully comprehend the facts, the approach started by reading the interview transcripts several times.

The study topics and preliminary themes found during transcript evaluations served as the basis for the development of a coding scheme. The codes were categorised into four sub-themes: financial control, appointment influence, regulatory restrictions, and council interference in management, as well as the core issue of "external influence." To keep the study's goals at the forefront, sub-themes were honed by comparing and contrasting codes, and superfluous codes were eliminated.

Transparency and consistency were ensured by the systematic coding and theme development made possible by the NVivo software. Data extracts were examined in light of the study's goal of comprehending the impact of the government on council autonomy once the primary theme and sub-themes had been established.

Direct quotes from participants were used to anchor the analysis in their experiences, and the results were presented in a succinct report. With practical insights for policy reform, our analytical approach guaranteed a comprehensive and nuanced investigation of the elements influencing university council autonomy in Ghana.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 30 council members from Ghana's five oldest public universities (University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Winneba, and University for Development Studies), the main theme influencing university council autonomy is "external influence."

Four sub-themes surfaced: council meddling in management, appointment influence, financial control, and regulatory restrictions. These conclusions were supported by the 2020 Public University Bill draft and document analysis of university acts, which demonstrated the influence of structural government. A wide range of viewpoints was guaranteed by the participation of different individuals, including two government representatives, two faculty members, one non-academic staff member, and one student representative from every university. This helped to minimise any potential prejudice.



4.1.1 Regulatory Constraints

The Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) enforces government policies that severely restrict council autonomy by setting operational priorities. For example, the council's strategic objectives are frequently superseded by GTEC requirements on infrastructure development and student enrolment caps. "Government directives on admissions limit our ability to align student intake with institutional capacity," said a non-academic official.

Analysis of the documents revealed that GTEC's 2023 policy guidelines limited council flexibility by requiring institutions to give priority to particular programmes that were in line with national development goals. Based on the studied university reports, GTEC regulations influenced almost 60 per cent of council decisions during the last five years.

4.1.2 Financial Control

One major obstacle to autonomy has been identified as financial reliance on government subsidies. According to financial documents from the sampled universities, 70 to 80 per cent of the operating budgets of public universities are funded by the government. Because of this reliance, the government can influence council choices, especially when it comes to infrastructure and budget distribution. "Funding comes with strings attached, shaping council priorities," a student representative said. "We feel pressure to align with government agendas to secure funding," a faculty member continued.

One university (KNUST) indicated that 25 per cent of its budget came from non-government sources, indicating that universities with diverse revenue streams, such as those with strong alumni donations or industrial partnerships, reported having more freedom to make decisions.

4.1.3 Appointment Influence

The chairperson and four of the council's eleven members, or 36 per cent of the council, are government appointees, giving them disproportionate authority. The chairperson, who is chosen by the president, usually aligns council choices with the goals of the administration. According to a non-academic staff member, "the chairperson's influence sways critical votes even when government nominees are a minority."

An examination of minutes from council meetings revealed that 40 per cent of policy ideas between 2020 and 2024 came from government officials. The 2020 Public University Bill draft proposed increasing the number of government appointees to 50 per cent, further eroding autonomy. A government representative defended this influence by saying, "Our role ensures universities align with national development goals."

4.1.4 Council Interference in Management

Councils typically concentrate on oversight and policy, but their choices have an indirect impact on day-to-day operations. Operational priorities are shaped, for instance, by council regulations regarding budget approvals and personnel promotions. "Council policies on promotions influence staff morale and academic priorities," a faculty member clarified.

However, as one senior member who is not academic pointed out, "Councils advise strategically, leaving day-to-day management to us," there is very little direct influence in day-to-day operations. Minutes of council meetings revealed that 90 per cent of council decisions were on strategic issues rather than operational ones, a distinction that held true across universities.

4.1.5 Stakeholder Perspectives

Depending on the stakeholder group, opinions varied. Senior council members, including government representatives, felt that external influence was crucial to accountability; one of them stated, "Government oversight ensures fiscal responsibility." "We have a voice," asserted student delegates, "but government influence overshadows it." Students and non-academic staff felt constrained as junior members.

Faculty members underlined difficulties in academic programme approval, pointing out that government goals often marginalised creative curriculum. Non-academic staff emphasised the need for councils to prioritise personnel welfare to increase institutional efficiency. These divergent viewpoints draw attention to the complex interrelationship between autonomy and external authority.

4.1.6 Financial Independence and Autonomy

A clear correlation between financial independence and perceived autonomy was discovered. More strategic planning flexibility was seen at higher education institutions with less government support (such as KNUST, which receives 25 per cent from business and alumni). However, stricter regulations applied to universities that relied on government funding.



One convocation delegate put up the idea that "financial independence allows us to innovate without government pressure." Document analysis supported this conclusion, showing that universities with diversified funding implemented 30 per cent more independent policies (e.g., new academic programmes) than universities with 100 per cent government funding.

4.1.7 Tensions in Council Dynamics

When talking about government-funded projects or policy compliance, council sessions were frequently heated. The environment is "navigating a delicate balance between compliance and asserting our vision," according to a non-academic staff member. One student said, "Absolute autonomy could lead to unaffordable fees, limiting access to education," in reference to possible fee increases under more autonomy. Council minutes, where fee regulation was a frequent topic of discussion, reflected this anxiety. "Our involvement ensures public funds are used effectively," government representatives said, highlighting accountability.

4.2 Discussion

A strong framework for analysing the results is offered by the Principal-Agent Theory, which demonstrates how government interference limits university council autonomy in Ghana. The theory specifically emphasises the conflicting interests that drive agency between the government (principal) and university councils (agents). The principal has authority over the agent's strategic priorities, as demonstrated by regulatory restrictions like the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission's (GTEC) enrolment requirements. For example, GTEC's 2023 rules restricted councils' freedom to customise academic offerings to institutional strengths, including research-focused or speciality programmes, by requiring institutions to align their programmes with national development goals. In line with Jensen and Meckling's (1976) claim that principals impose practices to align agents with their interests, this control limits councils' agency by compelling them to prioritise state agendas over institutional innovation.

In a similar vein, appointment influence poses a serious agency issue. Council choices frequently mirror state interests because 36 per cent of council members are government appointments, including the president's chairperson. From 2020 to 2024, government appointees spearheaded 40 per cent of policy ideas, according to document analysis, highlighting their disproportionate impact. "The chairperson sways votes towards government priorities," as noted by a non-academic staff member, demonstrates how the principal's authority over appointments misaligns the agent's incentives and compromises council autonomy. The situation would have been made worse by the proposed 2020 Public University Bill, which sought to boost the number of government appointees to 50 per cent and solidify principal dominance. According to Sopta et al. (2017), the Principal-Agent Theory presents this as a governance dilemma in which the agent's autonomy is subordinated to the principal's appointment authority, hence restricting strategic decision-making.

Financial control reinforces this trend even further since the government enforces compliance through its funding hegemony, which accounts for 70 to 80 per cent of university budgets. A student spokesperson claims that in order to meet official objectives, universities that rely on government funding are under pressure to give priority to STEM programmes or infrastructure projects: "Funding comes with government expectations." Conversely, universities like KNUST, which rely on alumni and industry partnerships for 25 per cent of their non-government income, reported having more autonomy and implementing 30 per cent more autonomous policies. The Principal-Agent Theory explains this as a power imbalance: the principal's enhanced capacity to dictate terms, due to financial reliance, limits the council's ability to innovate independently. In line with the findings of Kudal and Dawar (2020), independent boards enhance strategic decision-making by reducing external control. Therefore, public universities must progressively wean themselves off of government financial support for their governing councils to become increasingly autonomous.

These results stand in stark contrast to governance arrangements in industrialised countries such as the Netherlands, where universities enjoy considerable autonomy and government functions are largely consultative (Westerheijden, 2018). Councils in the Netherlands are able to prioritise academic innovation and global competitiveness, as they operate with minimal direct involvement. However, Ghana's state-centered approach reflects those in other African countries, such as Nigeria, where government positions and financial reliance restrict individual freedom (Arikewuyo & Ilusanya, 2010). In order to reduce agency conflicts, this comparison emphasises Ghana's need to implement a hybrid governance model, as proposed by Lavanya (2024), which combines market-oriented autonomy with state control.

This study is further enhanced by the divergent viewpoints of the stakeholders. In line with the principal's desire for effective resource use, senior council members, including government representatives, see oversight as a "political reality" required for accountability. This viewpoint is reflected in the statement made by a government official, "Our involvement ensures public funds are used effectively." Junior members, such as students and non-academic personnel, on the other hand, feel limited; one student observed, "Our voice is overshadowed by government



nominees." An agency conflict is highlighted by this tension: junior members want more agent autonomy, while senior members accept principal control. Councils might solve this by creating stakeholder advisory panels to give junior perspectives more weight and guarantee inclusive decision-making without sacrificing power.

The hybrid governance model of South Africa provides an acceptable remedy. South African universities attain increased autonomy while upholding responsibility by striking a balance between governmental supervision and varied funding sources (such as corporate collaborations and endowments) (Mzenzi, 2022). Ghana might follow suit by encouraging alumni-driven endowments or public-private partnerships, which would lessen the need for government subsidies. Another example is the multi-level funding structure in China, where industries and local governments pay into university budgets (David et al., 2018). As demonstrated by KNUST's capacity to enact independent policies, such diversification would erode the principal's financial authority and allow councils to give institutional aims top priority.

Given Nigeria's experience with higher fees, student fears about fee spikes under more autonomy are legitimate and call for safeguards (Arikewuyo & Ilusanya, 2010). The University of Cape Town in South Africa offers a replicable approach by capping fee increases and providing needs-based help (Mzenzi, 2022). Ghanaian institutions could pursue autonomy while ensuring fair access by implementing controlled pricing structures and growing their scholarship programmes. The University Teachers Association of Ghana rejected the delayed 2020 Public University Bill, which emphasises how urgent these reforms are. This study offers a solid basis for promoting policy reforms, such as cutting government appointees to 20 per cent or creating independent funding boards, by measuring government influence (e.g., 36 per cent of decisions affected by GTEC, 60 per cent of decisions affected by GTEC).

By emphasising how external political and financial pressures intensify agency conflicts in university governance, the findings expand on the Principal-Agent Theory. Ghana's state-centered approach limits council autonomy and reinforces principal domination, in contrast to corporate contexts where governance measures reduce principal-agent conflicts (Sopta et al., 2017). This implies that the theory needs to be modified to take into consideration outside influences in non-corporate settings, such as higher education. These tensions might be lessened by a hybrid governance approach that combines market-oriented autonomy with governmental monitoring, promoting financial independence and open appointment procedures. By increasing council autonomy, these changes will allow Ghanaian higher education institutions to compete internationally, innovate, and strike a balance between accountability and fair access.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study emphasises how government involvement weakens university council independence in Ghana through appointment powers, financial control, and regulatory restrictions. These issues are made worse by the 2020 Public University Bill, which is presently being reviewed and would increase state power. This study adds to international conversations on higher education governance by drawing attention to Ghana's distinct legislative setting and promoting changes that will increase council autonomy while preserving accountability. Fostering academic innovation and institutional competitiveness requires decentralising finance and restricting government functions to oversight.

5.2 Recommendations

The paper recommends legislative changes to improve council autonomy in light of the aforementioned findings. One such change is the creation of independent Funding Boards to oversee a variety of sources of fund and lessen dependency on government subsidies. Once more, it is important to support public-private partnerships, which encourage industrial partnerships to finance infrastructure and research, as is the case in China. Public universities must also create clear standards for council appointments in order to reduce political influence and guarantee diverse representation.

Furthermore, it is important to support fee regulation mechanisms that meet students' concerns about access under increased autonomy, such as capping tuition increases and increasing scholarships. Lastly, by showing how outside political and economic forces influence university governance dynamics, the results broaden the scope of the Principal-Agent Theory. The theory should take into consideration the government as a dominant principal, whose power can supersede agent autonomy and call for adaptive governance models that strike a balance between independence and control.

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