

Becoming a Research University as a Strategic Choice in Bahir Dar University: A Resource Dependency Perspective

Koye Kassa Getahun

Assistant Professor, School of Educational Sciences, College of Education, Bahir Dar University

Nigusse Weldemariam Reda

Assistant Professor, Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Mekele University

Abeba Seyoum Wube

Lecturer, Department of Leadership and Good Governance, Civil Service University

Abstract

This paper explored how the need for research universities in Ethiopia is justified, practiced, and could be improved using the strategic tactics of the resource dependency perspective. Bahir Dar University (hereafter referred to as BDU) was taken as a case to understand the need for a research university and its practices. Document analysis was used as a source of data. Consequently, an analysis of various institutional and national secondary sources revealed that the existing uncertainties related to critical resources motivated Bahir Dar University to devise a strategic choice of becoming a research university. The uncertainties are justified in terms of economic, political and institutional conditions. Although the university envisioned becoming a research university by 2025, the existing institutional and national conditions seem to be immature to sustain the necessary resources and conditions that a research university requires. As a result, following the higher education differentiation effort, BDU had to revise its vision and extend the possible time its vision could be realized to 2030. It is concluded that the need for BDU to become a research university seems to be challenging and needs much effort to be realized. Hence, institutional re-arrangements following the strategic tactics of the resource dependency perspective need to be devised to realize the strategic choice of becoming a research university.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 December 2022

Accepted 19 April 2023

KEYWORDS

Strategic choice, resource dependency, research university, strategic tactics

Introduction

Nowadays, a university that considers itself to be a contributor to the society and gives value for research and discovery claims to be a research university (Lacroix & Maheu, 2015). Hence, the need for research universities is becoming a global enthusiasm. Almost all higher education institutions are unanimously aspiring to become a research university – a university “committed

CONTACT Koye Kassa Getahun ✉ koyekassa@gmail.com

© 2023 The Author (s). **Open Access.** This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/bdje.v23i2.5>



to the creation and dissemination of knowledge in a range of disciplines and fields and featuring the appropriate laboratories, libraries, and other infrastructures that permit teaching and research at the highest possible level” (Altbach, 2007, p. 15).

Studies like Altbach (2007, 2011) revealed that the concern towards research universities has begun around 1980s. The development of knowledge economies that depend on intensive knowledge and innovation along the need for the institutional reputation in science and research has led to the establishment of research universities in most European countries and the United States of America. However, although the majority of the research universities are in the developed world, several higher education institutions in the global south are also aspiring to become research universities. As they do for developed countries, research universities could play crucial roles in uplifting the national and economic development of developing countries and regions (Altbach, 2007).

The primary intention of research universities is to create impact on the social and economic development of countries and regions. In this regard, Lacroix and Maheu (2015) emphasized the direct and central role research universities can play in both scientific advancement and the general economy and the society in which they operate. Lacroix and Maheu (2015) also described the research university as “a distinct form of academic institution” (p. xiii). Nonetheless, while serving such purposes, the establishment of research universities becomes a strategic choice that universities make to avert their dependence on the environment for critical resources such as fund, students, faculty, and other infrastructure. Therefore, becoming a research university is a double-sword strategy used to manage university’s dependency, while benefiting the society through research, teaching and community service. It is taken as a rational adaptation that universities do to cope with environmental pressures and constraints.

Research universities are also considered as world-class universities. Salmi (2009) identified three complementary characteristics of world-class universities: (a) high concentration of talent (faculty and students); (b) abundant resources to offer a rich learning environment and to conduct advanced research, and (c) favorable governance that encourages strategic vision, innovation and flexibility. According to the Carnegie Foundation’s methodology, research universities are considered as institutions that emphasize on postgraduate studies in multiple fields of study, particularly of PhD level, committed to research and research grants to their staff (Lacroix, & Maheu, 2015). Similarly, Altbach (2009) characterized research universities as:

... a cadre of full-time faculty, academic freedom, a salary structure permitting a local middle-class lifestyle, promotion and salary enhancement based on performance rather than just seniority, reasonable guarantees of long-term appointment, absence of corruption in all the sectors of academic work, and an academic culture of competition and research productivity (p. 26).

Therefore, research universities are institutions with competent staff selected on the basis of their performances and productivity. Besides, they require optimal organizational environments such as academic freedom, performance-based promotion, attractive remunerations and long-term

employment to attract faculty and students. Furthermore, as indicated by Altbach (2013), research universities function in a differentiated academic system and require high-tech physical facilities and laboratories. These characteristics witness that research universities are complex. They operate under dynamic environment and hence are strategically focused. Thus, in one way or the other, research universities need to be active in interacting with their environment (government, research institutes, industries and the like) for financial, human, material and other resources.

Research universities encounter different challenges. Unstable funding and inconsistent relationship with the state, inefficiency and incompatible governance schemes are among the challenges (National Academy of Sciences-NAS, 2017). According to Altbach (2009), lack of commercialization of research outputs, autonomy, and accountability are other challenges that research universities are facing. The challenges mentioned above are linked with resources implying that the success of research universities depends on the sustainability and diversity of resources. Without this it is difficult for research universities to be competitive and survive under intense environmental turbulences.

Higher education institutions in Ethiopia are no exception. Despite the development of higher education which has a history of seventy years, several changes that conform to the current global dynamics in higher education have been observed in the country at various levels: macro, meso and micro levels. One of which, for example, is the aspiration to become a research university. Becoming a research university appears to be in vogue among higher education institutions in Ethiopia. Universities, irrespective of their institutional differences in reputations, research outputs and years of establishment, have been dreaming to become a research university.

Indeed, Ethiopian universities are mandated to execute three major missions, i.e. teaching, research, and community services (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia-FDRE, 2009). However, almost all universities are aspiring to become a research university, and this aspiration attracted further concerns and debates. Parts of these concerns are related to the resources required to become research universities. As Altbach (2007, p.17) noted, “research universities are inevitably expensive to operate and require more funds than other academic institutions. They are also generally more selective in terms of student admissions and faculty hiring and typically stand at the pinnacle of an academic system”. Conversely, Ethiopian universities are underfunded, and they have limited authority to select best and brightest students as the research university may require. Students’ placement is undertaken by the Federal Ministry of Education. However, recently, following the differentiation of higher education institutions in Ethiopia and the categorization of universities as research universities, applied sciences and comprehensive universities (MOSHE, 2020), there might be a tendency towards granting autonomy to at least research universities.

As far as the researchers’ knowledge is concerned, except for few programs at postgraduate levels, the placement of students in different universities is carried out by the Ministry of Education. Similarly, universities do not have adequate right to select the best and brightest faculty members. Most recruitment activities are performed by the civil service code which gives less room for higher education institutions to recruit academic staff through different mechanisms such

as mind hunting, dual employment, etc. Besides, the payment scale is determined by the federal government and academic rank is mostly determined by academic publications. Due to this, Ethiopian universities' aspirations to become a research university and the actual context of the universities seem to oppose each other. In other words, although the universities have been aspiring to become a research university, there were no institutional and environmental conditions that support the aspirations of the universities.

Regardless of the absence of these conditions, BDU has already set its vision and has strived to achieve its mission for the last eight years. At the time of BDU's initiative to become a research university, the aspiration to become a research university was a bone of contention among the academic community. However, in 2020, the then Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MOSHE) conducted a higher education differentiation study and classified universities into three as research universities, universities of applied sciences, and comprehensive universities. As per the results of the differentiation effort, and based on its achievements and challenges faced, in its second strategic plan BDU revised its vision and came up with a new ten-year strategic plan (2020/21- 2029/30). As a result, the previous vision of becoming one of the top ten research universities in Africa by 2025 is now changed to "becoming one of the leading research-intensive universities in Africa and the first choice in Ethiopia by 2030" (BDU, 2020, p. 5).

Therefore, this study was initiated to draw some recommendations on how the strategic choice to become a research university could be achieved amid institutional and environmental constraints in terms of resources. In doing so, the researchers limited the analysis to BDU which is one of the Ethiopian universities that aspires to become a leading research-intensive university in Africa by 2030. In line with this, the present study attempted to address the following research questions: (1) Why does Bahir Dar University justify its aspiration of becoming a research university? (2) What achievements and challenges did Bahir Dar University encounter while executing its strategic choice of becoming a research university?

Theoretical Framework

Organizations, including higher education institutions, operate under turbulent environment. Consequently, they constantly strive to manage the turbulence and uncertainty through different strategic choices. According to Campling and Michelson (1998, p. 579), "strategic choice explains how organizations acquire resources and manage dependencies". The present study, therefore, is conducted using the Resource Dependence Theory as its analytical framework.

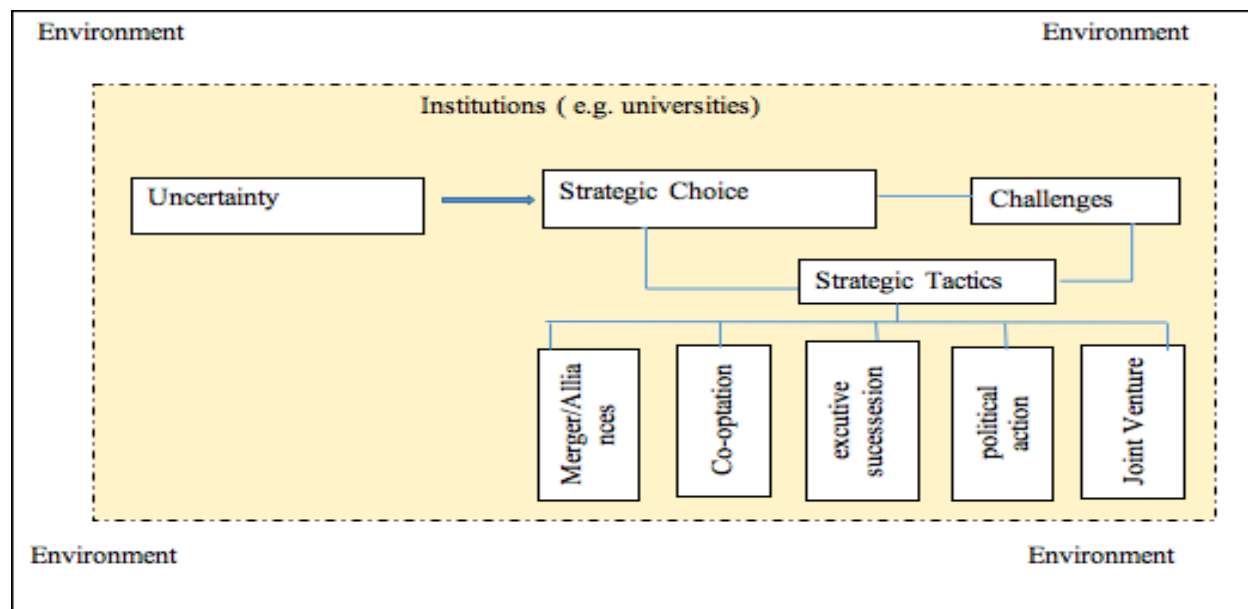
The resource dependence theory claimed that "organizations, as open systems, necessarily transact with other organizations in their environment to obtain the resources necessary for their survival" (Kessler & Tuckman, 2013, p. 659). The theory has three major assumptions: (1) As organizations are embedded in a network of interdependencies and social relationships, the need for resources like financial, human and information makes organizations potentially dependent on their external sources of resources. According to Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), the dependencies

are mutual (reciprocal). (2) Attributed to particularities interdependence such as structure and locations, some organizations have more power than others. In addition, external resource dependence affects the internal power dynamics of organizations like people, groups or departments within the organization that depend on external resources held by more powerful organizations. (3) Although organizations are constrained by their environment, they have opportunities to obtain resources, autonomy, and negotiate with constraints using variety of tactics (Kessler & Tuckman, 2013; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). This implies that organizations are not passive entities that sway and are determined by external pressures. Organizations have the capabilities to revert their dependencies through strategic choices. Through the strategic choice, organizations identify strategic areas that help them to manage the uncertainties and dependencies on other organizations (Campling & Michelson, 1998).

Like other organizations, universities are operating under constant external pressures. Hence, being a research university is becoming a common strategic choice for higher education institutions to respond to resource constraints. In so doing, universities may use a variety of tactics to cope with constraints and to ultimately achieve their strategic choices. These tactics may include co-optation, merger, joint venture, political actions, and executive succession (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). On the basis of this understanding, the following conceptual framework was developed to undertake the present study.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework



Note: This framework is developed by the researchers based on literature review.

The diagram depicts that universities like any organization are influenced by the external environment composed of different organizations. Accordingly, there is an interdependence of

relationships between higher education institutions and their environment. However, as the environment consists of different competing organizations that compete for critical resources, higher education institutions may operate under constant uncertainties. Hence, higher education institutions need to deal with the environmental uncertainties through strategic choices. One of these strategic choices could be, for example, becoming a research university. While executing the strategic choices, universities may use different tactics such as co-optation (inclusion of diversified external organization groups into university board membership); mergers (combination of two or more universities or institutions); joint ventures (collaborations with different business organizations); political action (development of new rules and regulations to avert environmental dependencies); and executive succession (appointment and retaining of top managers from external companies) (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

Methods

This study employed qualitative research approach with case study design. Data were collected using document analysis. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give meaning to a research topic (Bowen, 2009). As to Bowen (2009), document analysis incorporates coding content into themes in the way focus group or interview transcripts are analyzed. Though the combination of methods in the study of the same phenomenon is an invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation, document analysis is an important research tool in its own right (Bowen, 2009). Hence in this study, document analysis is used as a primary research tool.

According to O'Leary (2014), there are three types of documents namely public records, personal documents and physical evidence. Among these documents, the present study employed public records and physical evidence types of documents. Public records refer to the official, ongoing records of an organization's activities. In this regard, the study used documents such as mission statements, annual reports, policy manuals, and strategic plans. As far as physical evidence, which refers to objects found within the study setting, is concerned, the study tried to utilize documents such as flyers, posters, agendas, and handbooks.

To be specific, documents of the University such as the university *Blue Book* (BDU, 2014), reports, strategic plans (e.g., BDU, 2015, 2020), and websites of the University and the Federal Ministry of Education were analyzed. In addition, published sources on the topic "research university" were collected and analyzed from different databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar.

Results

This section presents the results of the study obtained from different secondary sources. Accordingly, data obtained from the university strategic plans, directives, national policies and

strategies are presented and discussed against previously published research outputs. The section is presented in the following two themes that emanate from the research questions.

1. Why did Bahir Dar University Aspire to Become a Research University?

Our examination of different secondary sources revealed that a multitude of external uncertainties led BDU to devise its strategic choice for becoming a research university. Parts of these uncertainties emanated from the competitive economic environment that Ethiopia is aspiring to achieve by 2025 (recently extended to 2030). In this regard, the university's blue book stated the following:

As Ethiopia is aspiring to be a middle-income country by 2025, it needs to have a research university that competes with the universities of other middle-income countries. And Bahir Dar University needs to be premier in achieving its competitiveness in the spheres of teaching, research, and technology transfer (BDU, 2014, p. 1).

Ethiopia envisions becoming a middle-income country by 2025. Consequently, considerable activities are underway to achieve its vision. Hence, the current activities and future national targets have seemingly created urgency in the strategic visions of BDU. On one hand, the university needs to situate itself within the higher education strategic direction of the country. On the other hand, the university stood first in the 2020 MOSHE's higher education differentiation study and became under the research university category (MOSHE, 2020). The rank the university earned is the result of its efforts and commitment towards its vision of becoming a research university. Therefore, the strategic choice of becoming a research university is made to build the university's competitiveness which helps to grapple with future challenges related to competitions and competitiveness.

Besides, the university's desire to become a research university seems to be related to the emerging uncertainties emanating from the existing higher education expansion process in Ethiopia. The number of higher education institutions in Ethiopia is growing and this seems to be an additional reason for BDU to develop a new strategic option. As the number of higher education institutions increased, the competitions for resources such as students, teachers, and government funds are likely to increase. Therefore, the university's strategic choice of becoming a research university is undertaken to increase the strategic advantage of the university in terms of these critical resources. This idea is well reflected in the university's blue book as follows: "When the university becomes a research university, it is likely to attract students and teachers. It is also most likely that the University will earn better budget when it became a research university" (BDU, 2014,p.13).

The same source goes on and specifies the following elements as the rationale for the development of its strategic choice of becoming a research university. These are (1) to support students and teachers with the necessary knowledge, skill and attitude so that they could be productive citizens who understand global and national contexts, (2) to develop the knowledge

and skills of intellectuals (i.e., teachers and students) into resources and thus contribute to national economic development, (3) to increase the role of education in social development, and (4) to reduce brain drain and create self-confident citizens (BDU, 2014, pp. 16–17).

All these justifications seem to center on the accumulation, exploitation, and management of resources: both physical and human resources. Yet, the justifications are explained indirectly in terms of the economic, political, and institutional conditions that the country is aspiring.

The economic justifications are explained in terms of the presumed contributions of the university to the society and the economy. These are mainly related to the capabilities of the graduates in influencing the economy and national development. The need to influence the external economic environment is exemplified in the University's blue book as follows: "Graduates of one university in America (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) come to establish more than 5000 companies that are able to earn 230 billion USD and above... and this is beyond the country's (Ethiopia's) annual budget" (BDU, 2014, p. 16).

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is among the reputable research universities in the world. It is known for its entrepreneurial capabilities of its graduates and research competence of its faculty. Therefore, like MIT, BDU has aspired to become a research university and influence the economy through its graduates equipped with entrepreneurial capabilities and skills.

The political justifications are those that conform to the political ideology that the country is adhering to. Aligned with the economic justifications, the university seems to justify and contribute to the political commitment advocated by the existing government. In this regard, the university's blue book illustrates this idea as follows:

Our country is striving to eradicate poverty and backwardness. It is aspiring to become among the middle-income countries by replicating the experiences of the East Asian Tiger Economics. Thus, our university needs to contribute to the commitment that the country is aspiring to (BDU, 2014, p.1).

In this case, initially BDU attempted to explain its need of becoming a research university following the political philosophy of the existing government: replicating the East Asian economies.

Unlike the economic and political justifications, the institutional justifications are internal. They focus on building the university in terms of teachers and students and other relevant infrastructure that help to attract competent teachers. In this regard the Blue Book insists the need to establish two complex research grade laboratories (one for sciences and the other for technology) and equip other teaching aids and laboratories. It also suggest that internship programs shall be expanded and strengthened by evaluating them regularly and taking appropriate actions" (BDU, 2014). The initial attempt of BDU has been lately supported by the country's Ministry of Science and Higher Education differentiation study of 2020.

Therefore, as evidenced by the justifications presented above, the BDU justified its aspiration of becoming a research university mainly in terms of the existing uncertainties related

to its critical resources though supported by the government's direction of higher education. Nonetheless, these uncertainties are mainly implicit and explained in terms of economic, political and institutional contexts.

2. Achievements and Challenges Encountered by Bahir Dar University

This section presents the achievements and challenges that BDU has faced while executing its strategic choice of becoming a research university. The first sub-section highlights the achievements while the second one outlines the challenges that the university faced during the first (2011-2015) and second strategic (2016-2020) plans implementation periods.

2.1. Achievements Observed

The strategic vision of becoming a research university was crafted in 2010. Consequently, several endeavors have been undertaken to achieve some foundations in the first five years (i.e., 2011 to 2015). The major achievements of BDU observed in the three areas* (staff development, the institutionalization of research, and the enhancement of postgraduate programs) are presented below.

Staff Development

The existence of reputable and established faculty members characterizes research universities. Consequently, universities invest remarkable resources in building or attracting topnotch faculty with commendable skills in research and teaching. Reflecting this idea, BDU makes staff development as one priority area in its endeavors of becoming a research university. In this regard, although meager, some developments have been observed in the university's first strategic plan period (2011-2015).

During that period Ethiopia planned to establish three research universities having 50% of their academic staff with PhDs in the years between 2014/15 and 2019/20 (MoE, 2015). However, considering the existing figures in terms of the number of the academic staff with PhDs, the national plan seems to be ambitious. The national average for academic staff that hold PhDs in Ethiopia stands at 15% (Tamrat, 2018).

The staff development in BDU shares considerable similarities with the national plan. Although the number of PhDs was planned to reach 25% by the year 2015, an increment of 5% was observed in the 2011-2015 strategic period. The ratio among bachelor, master's, and PhD holders of the university stands at 26:63:11 respectively (BDU, 2015). Besides, in the second strategic plan period, the university claimed its achievements in terms of teaching and learning, research and publication, and community service engagements that helped it to be ranked first in MOSHE's 2020 differentiation study (BDU, 2020).

* These three areas are emphasized because they are the ones set as priority areas in the five-year strategic plan of the university (i.e., 2011-2015).

It is, however, important to note that the ratio of staff with different qualifications doesn't guarantee improvements in research profile. The increment in the number of PhDs should be linked with commitment and experience in research and innovations. As Altbach (2011) asserted, professors in research universities need to be committed to the culture of research beyond their level of qualification for teaching and research. Furthermore, commitment to research needs to create some economic benefits to attract research talented staff and improve research facilities and infrastructure (Altbach, 2009).

Institutionalization of Research

Beyond staff development, some activities were performed to institutionalize research in the university's core functions and structures. The following are good examples in this regard.

Establishment of Organizational Structure for Research

Before 2011, BDU had only one office known as "Research and Publication Section". The office was designed to initiate, implement and monitor research activities of the university (BDU, 2015). However, the research and publication section of the university and its responsibilities were not sufficient for the realization of the university's strategic choice. Thus, the University's research and publication office was restructured later on.

For example, in the first strategic period (2011-2015), the university's organizational structure was redesigned and thus an independent research office was established at a vice-president level with the name "Vice President Office for Research and Community Services" (RCSVP) (BDU, 2015). Under the RCSVP office, three directorates (research, community services and technology transfer) and nine research centers were established. Moreover, research and community services coordinators were assigned at college/faculty levels to facilitate research activities at a department level. However, such institutional structures are still challenged as a result of shortage of human and material logistics.

Identifications of Research Thematic Areas

Altbach (2009) stated that "research universities in developing countries need to select fields of research that are affordable and linked to national needs and priorities". Parts of the experiences in the BDU tend to reflect what Altbach has indicated. Following the introduction of new institutional structures, the research centers and academic units identified research thematic areas. The identification of the research themes was carried out in line with the country's priority area indicated in the first Growth and Transformation Plan-GTP (2015-2020). The strategic plan attested that the establishment of research universities will be implanted based on international standards and their teaching and learning processes will be linked with their mission of knowledge development and technological innovation (FDRE, 2016).

Increment in Research Budget

Research budget is one of the critical elements in the development of research universities (Altbach, 2007). Thus, one of the issues that BDU tried to focus in its first strategic period was the allocation of research fund. In the first strategic period, the public annual research budget of the university increased from one million in 2011 to forty million ETB in 2015 (BDU, 2015). Concomitantly, the number of research projects increased from negligible amount in 2011 to 500 in 2015.

To encourage staff participation in research, incentives were provided for academic staff who publish their works in reputable local and international journals. Besides, to develop the culture of academic discourse and research, weekly seminars, annual international and national research conferences have been organized. With these efforts, the annual scientific research output of BDU's staff has increased from 30 in 2011 to 300 in 2015 (BDU, 2015). The university-based journals also grew from one in 2011 to four in 2015. The publication of conference proceedings also became a trend.

Establishment of New Postgraduate Programs

The establishment of new postgraduate programs is a third priority area of the University in its path towards becoming a research university. In line with this, the university's strategic plan envisions producing 100 PhD graduates annually from 20 different disciplines and increasing postgraduate admissions to 50% (BDU, 2015).

Consequently, during the first five years of the first strategic period (2011-2015), the number of Master's and PhD students graduating from the university was reported to be 98 and 15, respectively (BDU, 2015). Currently, the ratio of Master's and PhD students stands at 13% and 0.2% respectively. Yet, 86.8% of the student population is in undergraduate programs and the remaining 13 percent is in postgraduate programs. This seems to reveal that the postgraduate enrollment in relation to the undergraduate enrollment is quite low and thus achieving the overarching goal by 2025 is somewhat demanding. It seems due to this fact that BDU revised its vision and extended the time from 2025 to 2030.

2.2. Challenges Encountered

The path towards becoming a research university cannot be free of challenges. Studies revealed that research universities may be confronted with various challenges of which some of them are internal while others external to the institutions. These internal and external challenges are inseparable. One may lead to the existence of the other. Likewise, BDU encountered the following internal and external challenges.

Internal Challenges

Limited Capability of Academic Staff

Academic staff capability is a springboard for the development of research universities. Without capable and qualified academic staff, the desire for patents, expanding horizons and innovations remain a dream. Therefore, in pursuit of becoming a research university, BDU identified that the limited capability of faculty members to develop new research proposals in collaboration with local industry was among the major bottlenecks in its first strategic period (BDU, 2015).

This was explained, among other things, in terms of the limited number of professors and academic staff with PhDs in the University. As indicated above, the qualification of the academic staff of BDU is predominantly Master's degree followed by B

achelor's degree holders. The faculty with PhD and professorship positions, besides their limited number, do not have adequate experience in research (BDU, 2015).

Lack of Relevant Infrastructure

Although the development of infrastructure such as the development of ICT and journal subscriptions and/or the establishment of journals were planned to increase significantly, the existing infrastructure development within the University was found to be limited and this, in turn, challenged the University's aspiration to become a research university (BDU, 2015).

Rent Seeking and Corruption

Higher education institutions are the centre of rampant corruption. BDU has also identified that rent-seeking and corruption were among the critical challenges it faced in the implementation period of the first strategic plan (BDU, 2015). In addition to the challenges indicated in the first strategic plan period, BDU identified several challenges it faced in the second strategic plan period under the following categories (BDU, 2020, pp.26-35).

Research practices

Fragmented nature of research, absence of transparent, consistent and efficient system, limited funding opportunities and management issues, lack of well-equipped research facilities and research administration problems.

Community engagement

Lack of conceptual clarity about what community engagement entails, weak teaching-research-community linkage, limited participation of staff and students, lack of reciprocal and mutual relationship with stakeholders, improvised financial and logistic issues, unorganized documentation and dissemination mechanism, and unfair rewarding system.

Human and financial resource development and coordination

Incompetent and outdated human resources management, insufficient allocation and poor financial resources management, weak social cohesion, coordination and collaboration, weak motivation and staff capacity to cope with rapid technological outmodedness, and lack of effective monitoring and performance appraisal system.

Governance and leadership

Instable organizational structure and continuity in change, absence of females in leadership positions, limitation in leadership decision making, staff refraining from participating in leadership, and poor grievance procedure.

Communication and partnership

Limited flow of information within and outside the university's system and limited networking and partnership,

Facilities and working environment

Infrastructure limited in quality, quantity, access and coverage to offer the required services, lack of buildings and offices equipped with relevant resources and equipment necessary for the staff, unfair distribution and utilization of resources and inaccessibility of buildings for people with disabilities.

All of the above-mentioned challenges and weaknesses may need strong and effective strategic leadership to maintain and secure sustainable resources.

External Challenges

Lack of Adequate Attention to the Establishment of Research Universities

Almost all research universities are publicly funded institutions (Altbach, 2007). Although institutional ambitions are important, it is difficult to realize a research university without the attention of the government. The government should create a pleasant working environment for research universities in terms of funds, recruitment of academic staff and research endeavours. Unfortunately, the attention of the Ethiopian government to the establishment of research universities is meagre (Woldegiyorgis, 2018b).

Limited Autonomy

Research universities demand autonomy unlike universities that focus on the training and re-training of students (Altbach, 2009). Nevertheless, the existing condition in Ethiopian higher education seems to reveal that universities, irrespective of their aspirations, do not have the autonomy to recruit academic staff based on their own guidelines; cannot select students that fit

their academic programs, and there is no a special funding scheme devised to distribute the available financial resources to the research and non-research universities.

In a similar manner, Bahir Dar University identified threats that hamper its progress towards the realization of its research university vision. Some of the threats include; instability resulting from inflation and socio-political conditions of the country, rigid government policies, rules, regulations, poor taxation regime, high rate of graduate unemployment, poor education quality, lack of interest and capacity of local businesses for partnership, competition for limited resources and shortage of foreign currency BDU (2020, pp.35-36).

Lessons to be Learned from the Resource Dependence Theory: Researchers' Reflection

Based on the resource dependence perspective, universities may apply different tactics to achieve their strategic choices. Therefore, considering the existing achievements and challenges of BDU, the researchers recommend the following based on the Resource Dependency perspective.

Executive Succession

Executive succession refers to the selection and retaining mechanism of top leaders and managers of the organizations. In the context of the present study, it may refer to the president of the university and the mechanisms within which the university president is recruited. As Bastedo and Bowman (2011, p. 7) indicated “as presidents are expected to manage the crucial strategic contingencies of the organization, both selection procedures and contract provisions often shift to recognize changing environments”.

The selection of university presidents in Ethiopia has been a point of contest for the last twenty years. University presidents were recruited through appointment by the Federal Ministry of Education that solely depends on two criteria: membership in the ruling party (the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) and place of birth. Besides, their membership to the political party, university presidents need to be born in the place where the university is established. Consequently, there were claims that university presidents were accountable to the ruling political party rather than to the academic and research community of their universities.

BDU has been experiencing similar situations. Although the university has established ambitious plans and visions like the vision of becoming a research university by 2025 (later extended to 2030), the university's presidents prior 2017 were directly assigned rather than merit-based competitions. It is only since 2017 that competition-based university presidency was introduced in the country (Woldegiyorgis, 2018a). However, this may not be sufficient to achieve the strategic choice of the university. Becoming a research university requires multifaceted knowledge of global and local conditions. Therefore, university presidents, as they are the captains

of their universities, need to have knowledge and experience in local industry, policy making, and local and international organizations.

Academic knowledge as explained in terms of publications and academic rank are not sufficient to lead a university that aspires to become a research university. For example, the call for recruiting a president announced by BDU contains four major criteria, one of which is experience in serving in higher education, industry, research institute or related institutions with a record of immense contribution and performance (BDU, 2017). The university has to use its rank in the differentiation process and the direction given by MOSHE to work towards a research university as an opportunity to create strong partnerships with different national and international research and financial institutions so as to meet its strong resource demand. Moreover, it is also vital for the University to attract top-notch university staff (Ethiopian or non-Ethiopian) to realize its vision.

Board of Directors of Universities

Composition of board members and the number of its membership contribute to organizational success in managing uncertainties and dependencies (Hillman et al., 2009). As the diversity of the advisory body increases, the capability of the organization to influence its external environment is likely to increase. Cohesion among board members enhances communication, decision making processes and support (Drees & Heugens, 2013).

According to the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation, public universities are supposed to have a board composed of seven voting members (FDRE, 2009). Three of the voting members are selected by the University's senate and approved by the Federal Ministry of Education and the remaining four voting members including the chairperson of the board are appointed by the Federal Ministry of Education. The Higher Education Proclamation Article 45(5) goes on and states that:

The members ... shall be past or present holders of responsible positions and notable personalities especially in teaching or research and in integrity or be representatives of the customers of the products and services of the institution and whose exceptional knowledge, experience and commitment are such as to enable them to contribute to the attainment of the mission of the institution and the objectives of higher education generally (FDRE, 2009, p. 5011).

However, the criteria used to select members of the university's board are vague (Woldegiyorgis, 2015). Most university boards are composed of government officials with meager work experience in higher education and industry. The board members are either members or supporters of the ruling party (Gebremeskel & Feleke, 2016). Thus, they are more fanatic to inculcate the political ideologies of the ruling party than to serve the academic and research aspirations of the university.

The context of BDU is not different. Previously, all six board members were senior members of the ruling party. Besides, four board members were senior officials and heads of

different offices. Generally the university's board had the following limitations pertaining to the demands of a research university.

First, the compositions of board members are filled with officials from different government offices. This would eventually make the board myopic in its orientations and limited in its scope of influence. As there are no members from the private and industry sector, the possibility of the University to earn additional funds and to establish partnerships with the industry and research institutes could be limited. Hence, the board needs to have members from the industry, research institutes and other civic organizations.

Second, because it is dominated by members affiliated to the ruling political party, the board may have limited space to think new strategic initiatives and activities. Much effort of the board focuses on aligning and popularizing the existing practices of the university with the government's political ideology (Gebremeskel & Feleke, 2016).

Therefore, it is important to note that the previous board compositions, for reasons stated above, seem to deviate from the overall aspirations of the university, i.e., becoming a research university. A research university is a resource intensive institution and thus the composition of the board needs to be reshaped in a way that enhances the effectiveness of the board. Recently, there are some improvements. Accordingly, the existing board members of BDU consist of members from government offices, higher education institutions, and consultancies. However, still the university needs board members from national and international organizations who could contribute to its resource mobilization through collaborative partnership.

Political Action

Political action implies the creation of an environment that suits the purpose and interest of an organization through rules and regulations or some other political and economic means (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). It also encompasses all processes and endeavors that organizations do to reverse the rules and regulations that constrain the achievement of their aspirations. Applied to higher education context, political rules and regulations are among the major constraints that higher education institutions are facing in their effort to manage their interdependencies and uncertainties (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011).

Attributed to the nature of BDU and the limitations linked with the board composition and successions of executives, BDU seems to be constrained by rules and regulations that in reality constrained the university's effort towards becoming a research university. For example, students' placements are still carried out by the federal ministry of education, research budget is chronically limited, and the possibility to employ the best and brightest faculty through attractive remunerations is difficult and is limited by the civil service code.

Therefore, the university needs to make concerted political negotiations with the government over the creation of special rules and regulations that help to overcome these challenges. Political action, negotiations with other similar or higher institutions, is applicable in

the context where organizations face unalterable conditions that limit their purposes and interdependencies (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

Joint Ventures

Joint ventures refers to the conditions where organizations including higher education institutions create an alliance with other business organizations to realize their strategic choices (Hillman et al., 2009). The present study into the context of BDU revealed that though the university has strategic themes focusing on creating partnerships through offering joint degree programs and research and knowledge exchange with well-recognized universities, the kind and numbers of partnerships that the university created since the commencement of new vision of becoming a research university seems to be limited (BDU, 2015; BDU, 2020). Therefore, it is important to create inter-organizational relationships and partnerships with local and international research universities and research institutes. For example, the development of joint programs, research projects, and even business ventures may contribute to the resource generation that the university requires.

Mergers

Merger implies to the structural and functional combinations of two or more organizations into one entity (organization). It is undertaken to improve efficiency in resource utilization and global competitiveness of higher education institutions (Välilmaa et al., 2014). In their review on the resource dependence theory, Hillman et al., (2009) have identified three major purposes of organizational mergers which, in fact, are important to the context of higher education institutions. According to them, institutional mergers are important first, to reduce competition by absorbing an important competitor; second, to manage interdependence with either the sources of input or purchasers of output; and third, to diversify operations and thereby lessen dependence on the present organizations with which it exchanges.

Thinking the context of BDU, merger could be considered as one possible strategy to achieve its aspirations of becoming a research university. As indicated in the previous sections, the numbers of higher education institutions in Ethiopia are increasingly growing. Consequently, the competitions for critical resources are likely to increase. For example, the regional state where the present case university is found had only two universities in 2003. However, seven other public universities were established in fifteen years-time and thus the number of public universities in the region reached to eight in 2018. Accordingly, although mergers are national endeavors Välilmaa et al., (2014), merging with other similar universities and research institutes could be taken as a potential strategy to achieve the strategic choices of BDU.

Conclusions and Implications

The present analysis into BDU, one of the Ethiopian universities that aspire to become a research university, revealed that the uncertainty in relation to the critical resources is among the justifications underpinned to the aspiration of becoming a research university. The justifications are elicited in terms of economic, institutional, and political justifications that the country aspired to achieve by 2030.

Attributed to the strategic choice of becoming a research university, BDU is staggering to achieve some strategic issues in relation to staff development, institutionalization of research, and development of new postgraduate programs. However, considering the characteristics of the research universities, the university needs to sustain and revitalize some of its strategic activities. The analysis into the existing achievements of the university in line with the nature and characteristics of the research universities revealed that additional endeavors need to be undertaken to capacitate the university in the spheres that a research university need to have. The major challenges particularly in the area of research, community engagement, communication and partnership, governance and leadership, staff motivation and capacity, also need special attention. Without addressing these challenges, the dream to become a research university will remain a 'muse' than a 'reality'.

The question laid then on how the university could achieve its strategic choice of becoming a research university. The researcher proposed that working in executive successions, board compositions, mergers, political action and development of joint ventures could help the university in achieving its strategic choice. Some of these strategic recommendations could be performed by the university itself while others need the government's interventions. For example, the university could be involved in the development of joint ventures and joint negotiations to influence the government to bring changes in the executive successes, co-optation, and mergers. However, the remaining others such as board compositions and executive succession are stubbornly embodied with the roles of the federal government. Therefore, a two-way discussion between the Federal government and the university needs to be perused to realize the visions of becoming a research university. Without the intervention and commitment of the federal government, the strategic choice of becoming a research university would remain rhetoric.

Limitations of the Study

The present study relied on secondary sources and some personal experiences of the researchers. Besides, the study applied the resource dependence perspective to analyze the justification, achievements and hitherto solicit strategic tactics to realize the vision of becoming a research university. Therefore, although the study chronicled some critical findings related the aspirations of becoming a research university, the results seem to have limitations. The main limitation is its dependence on document analysis only. Therefore, further research that integrates primary sources of data (e.g., in-depth interview and questionnaire) is important to enhance the

scope and breadth of the finding regarding the needs for research universities in Ethiopia in general and BDU in particular.

References

- Altbach, P. G. (2007). Empires of knowledge and development. In P. G. Altbach & B. Jorge (Eds.), *World Class Worldwide: Transforming Research Universities in Asia and Latin America* (pp. 31–53). Johns Hopkins University press.
- Altbach, P. G. (2009). Peripheries and centers: Research universities in developing countries. *Management Decision*, 10, 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-009-9000-9>
- Altbach, P. G. (2011). The past, present, and future of the research university. In P. Altbach & J. Salmi (Eds.), *The road to academic excellence: The making of world-class research universities* (pp. 11–30).
- Altbach, P. G. (2013). Advancing the national and global knowledge economy: The role of research universities in developing countries. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(3), 316–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.773222>
- Bastedo, M. N., & Bowman, N. A. (2011). College rankings as an interorganizational dependency: Establishing the foundation for strategic and institutional accounts. *Research in Higher Education*, 52, 3–23. <https://doi.org/52:3-23> DOI 10.1007/s11162-010-9185-0
- BDU. (2014). *The blue book: Bahir Dar University the road to vision 2025*. Bahir Dar University.
- BDU. (2015). *Strategic plan (2015/16-2019/20)*. Bahir Dar University.
- BDU. (2017). *Vacancy announcement for presidency of Bahir-Dar University*. Bahir Dar University.
- BDU. (2020). *Strategic plan 2020 / 21-2029 / 30: Transforming BDU into a research-intensive University*. Bahir Dar University.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Campling, J. T., & Michelson, G. (1998). A strategic choice-resource dependence analysis of union mergers in the British and Australian broadcasting and film industries. *Journal of Management Studies*, 35(5), 579–600. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00110>
- Drees, J. M., & Heugens, P. P. M. A. R. (2013). Synthesizing and extending resource dependence theory: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Management*, 39(6), 1666–1698. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206312471391>
- FDRE. (2009). *The Federal Democratic of Ethiopia-higher education proclamation no. 650/2009*. FDRE
- FDRE. (2016). *Growth and transformation plan II (GTP II) (2015/16-2019/20): Vol. I*. Bahir Dar University.
- Gebremeskel, H. H., & Feleke, K. M. (2016). Exploring the context of Ethiopian higher

- education system using Clark ' s triangle of coordination. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 3883(September), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2016.1149739>
- Hillman, A. J., Withers, M. C., & Collins, B. J. (2009). Resource dependence theory: A review. *Journal of Management*, 25(6), 1404–1427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309343469>
- Kessler, E. H., & Tuckman, B. W. (2013). Encyclopedia of management theory: Group development. In *Encyclopedia of Management Theory: Group Development*. SAGE Knowledge. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452276090>
- Lacroix, R., & Maheu, L. (2015). *Leading research universities in a competitive world*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- MoE. (2015). *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Education Sector Development Programme V (ESDP V) 2008-2012 EC* (Issue Esdp V). Ministry of Education.
- MOSHE. (2020). *Differentiating the higher education system of Ethiopia: Study report*. Ministry of Science and Higher Education
- NAS-National Research Council.. (2017). *Research universities and the future of America: Ten breakthrough actions vital to our nation's prosperity and security*: <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/13396/chapter/1>
- O'Leary, Z. (2014). *The essential guide to doing your research project* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R. (2003). *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective*. Stanford University Press.
- Salmi, J. (2009). *The challenge of establishing world-class universities*. The World Bank.
- Tamrat, W. (2018). The meager output of Ethiopian Ph.D.s. *Inside Higher Education- A Blog from the Center for International Higher Education*, 5 <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/meager-output-ethiopian-phds>
- Välilmaa, J., Aittola, H., & Ursin, J. (2014). University mergers in Finland: Mediating Global Competition. *New Directions for Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20112>
- Woldegiyorgis, A. (2015). A glance at the Ethiopian higher education from the developmental state perspective. *Bahir Dar Journal of Education*, 15(2), 1–37. <https://journals.bdu.edu.et/index.php/bje/article/view/14>
- Woldegiyorgis, A. (2018a). *Ethiopia: A transparent approach to university president selection*. Center for International Higher Education. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/ethiopia-transparent-approach-university-president-selection-0>
- Woldegiyorgis, A. (2018b). *The case for an Ethiopian research university*. University World News. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20180313140743260>