



## **Influence of Gender, Age and Ethnic Diversity on the Autonomy of Faith-Based University Councils in Malawi**

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**Abstract:** This study sought to establish the influence of gender, age and ethnic diversity on the autonomy of faith-based university councils in Malawi using a Correlational Research Design with a sample of 200 respondents from whom 175 turned up. Data was collected through a validated questionnaire to which respondents had to indicate their agreement or disagreement with particular statements. Data analysis was done by using the IBM's SPSS software. The study affirmed the existing literature that age mix should be considered when constituting a governing body of a higher education institution for its proper functioning. The study further confirmed the role of gender in the appointment of the governing body of a college or a university as it has been found that gender mix brings different perspectives that enrich the deliberations in a University Council. Ethnic diversity is an important factor to be considered when constituting a University Council as the diversity provides unique opportunities for resource mobilization, enlisting international flavor and mitigating negative perceptions that comes from having members from one ethnic grouping. It is therefore recommended that those constituting University Councils should consider demographic diversity as part of the criteria of coming up with University Council members. Particularly, considerations about gender diversity, age diversity and ethnic diversity are vital in ensuring that the governing councils are effective in their functions.

**Keywords:** Gender diversity; age diversity; ethnic diversity; council autonomy; Faith-based University

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### **Introduction**

Autonomy is freedom and mandate of an institution to act by its own will in pursuit of its mission and goals (Pandey, 2004). The degree of autonomy depends on the extent an institution can decide its own actions and the extent it is directed to follow decisions and actions, not of its choice. The author further considers autonomy as unrestricted independence of action and capacity of action within the established customs, goals, mission, structure, systems and processes of the organization.

Asea and Aluoch (2016) hold that higher education governance systems usually reflect governance system of a particular society. Higher education

sector has its own very particular organizational cultural traditions and governance structures that are not always easy to implement. In this case, Pandey (2004) further argued that no higher learning institution can have effective institutional and academic autonomy unless the funding agencies grant financial autonomy by a contract that is either legally or socially enforceable.

Christensen (2011) retaliates that distinction could be made between formal autonomy and real autonomy. Formal autonomy could be judged more generally as whether the university has increasing formal independence. On the other hand, real autonomy is classified as actual degree of autonomy following a particular criterion. The author further

maintains that university autonomy can be seen from different dimensions like in a situation where a university has different degrees of autonomy related to formal affiliation, management system, financial system, and standardization of research and teaching activities.

Autonomy of higher education institutions is essential in establishing a successful going, overcome prevailing challenges and remaining competitive (Salmi et al., 2009; Lange, 2008). Increasing institutional autonomy is a key to enabling universities respond to new demands (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). According to Ferlie et al. (2009), the autonomy of a university is the best option to achieve institutional objectives.

According to Estermann and Nokkala (2009), autonomy refers to constantly changing relations between the state and higher education institutions and can be measured by assessing the institution's ability to make various decisions. Autonomy is contextually and politically defined according to contextual and political realities of where the university is located (Enders et al., 2013).

Christensen (2011) argues that Institutional autonomy goes beyond academic freedom and includes operational freedom and the freedom of deciding the framework and structure of the decision-making process. Institutional autonomy guarantees that the institution is entitled to determine its structure, systems, mission, goals and priorities consistent with the societal needs.

Pandey (2004) says that financial autonomy means freedom to raise and use funds. Any institution that raises its own funds can decide to use it according to its internal rules, systems and processes; it should not be constrained by external influences. Financial autonomy further refers to a university's ability to manage its funds and allocate its budget independently. Ojedele and Ilusanya (2006) described university autonomy as protection of the university from interference by government officials in day to day running especially in issues related to admission of students as well as appointment and dismissal of academic staff including the Vice Chancellor, determination of content of what has to be taught and determination of size and rate of growth.

While diversity of board structure may be viewed in terms of demographic factors such as board members' personal attributes, there is a general

agreement among researchers that effective board membership should include various age, gender, race or ethnicity and educational background groups (Carpenter et al., 2004; Joshi et al., 2011). According to Ocorian (2019), Board diversity improves the quality and objectivity of the decision-making process by bringing new voices to the table to the debate and to the decisions. It fosters innovation, creativity, and a better understanding of customer insights through a greater variety of problem-solving approaches, perspectives, and ideas. Jared (2020) argued that diverse directors have different views and perspectives which may add value to decisions made by the board in question.

Bond and Harrigan, (2010) suggest that boards need to have a broad mix of skills, knowledge and experience. Therefore, in selecting a new board member, the board should consider the skills, knowledge, attributes and experience needed to govern the organisation both now and in the future. As diversity of perspective is seen as a valuable attribute to a board's deliberations, boards should have a diversity policy to determine who qualifies to constitute its membership.

According to Ahn and Walker (2007), age plays a critical role in the board members' ability to initiate and embrace strategic changes of an organization. Furthermore, older board members are less likely to initiate changes and that younger board members are associated with greater strategic changes. Golden and Zajac (2001) observed that board members who were 50 years or older were positively associated with organizational strategic changes. Platt and Platt (2012) argued that organizations that are succumbed to bankruptcy had board members who were younger. This appears to indicate that while younger board members are likely to be change agents, older board members tend to be a safer pair of hands for the stability of the organization. They concluded that age determines experience and risk perception. Therefore, boards should have a mix between older members and younger members to benefits from both attributes.

Literature suggests that gender diversity tends to affect the board dynamics, decision making and cognitive processes. For example, while gender diversity has not been noted as affecting organization's profitability, there appears to be evidence to the effect that gender diversity has on

board dynamics (Terjesen et al., 2009). Therefore, it would be concluded that having gender diverse university councils is helpful for the organization.

Adams and Ferreira (2009) found that female board members tend to attend board meetings more regularly while male board members appear to skip board meetings more frequently. They also found that male board members seem to participate more in gender diverse boards. On the other hand, Nielsen and Huse (2010) discovered that boards that are gender diverse experience less conflict and are known to be more strategic than those boards whose gender representation is skewed. This shows that gender diverse university councils will be more effective than those with one dominant gender. Carter, et al. (2010) confirmed a positive relationship between percentage of females in boards of directors and firm performance. According to van der Walt and Ingley (2003), the issue of racial or ethnic diversity as a corporate board attribute has received support because it tends to reflect different perspectives and alter board dynamics which result better organizational outcomes. However, Carter, et al. (2010) did not find a definitive evidence that ethnically diverse boards affect the financial stability. However, Rentschler and Azmat (2017) argued that racial and ethnic diversity determine board dynamics, cognitive processing and venture outcomes. Cai et. Al., (2022) also confirmed that ethnic diversity of the Board affects organizational outcomes. Therefore, it can be concluded that in constituting a university council, attention should be given to ethnic diversity for better outcomes.

Therefore, while literature indicates that board diversity creates opportunities for generating different perspectives (Farrel & Hersch, 2005), this study sought to establish the influence of gender, age and ethnic diversity on the autonomy of faith-based university councils in Malawi. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between age distribution and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils?
2. Is there a significant relationship between gender diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils?
3. Is there a significant relationship between ethnic diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils?

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a Correlational Research Design which is used to establish relationships between two variables with no influence from extraneous variables. This design helps to recognize patterns and trends in institutions.

### Population and Sampling

A list of 28 faith-based universities in Malawi was made with each university identified by a number. The numbers were placed on separate pieces of paper and placed in a jar. The papers containing the numbers were picked randomly to give each university an equal chance of being selected. The process was repeated until 20 faith-based universities were selected with an estimated 10 respondents per university, giving 200 possible responses. Finally, there was a total of 175 valid respondents. The study used a closed-ended questionnaire to collect data from respondents who indicated their agreement or disagreement with statements in the questionnaire.

### Validity and Reliability

The test for internal consistency was conducted using the Cronbach's Alpha score as seen in table 1. The results show that there was a high internal consistency of the instrument as the Cronbach's Alpha score was 0.840 which is above 0.50. This shows that internal consistency was very good.

**Table 1: Reliability Statistics of the Study Instruments**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items
.840	.848

**Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.752
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Sig.	.000

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy in table 2 shows that the score is above .50 which stands at .752 showing that sampling was adequate, and the research may proceed with factor analysis which is statistically significant at  $<.001$ .

### Statistical Treatment of the Data

Data analysis was done by using IBM's SPSS software. Intensity of correlations was interpreted based on the following criteria:  $\geq .70$  = strong correlation,  $\geq .50$  = moderate correlation and  $\leq .50$  = weak correlation.

### Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire included a section of informed consent for participants, which stipulated that a participant had the freedom to choose to participate or not to participate in the study. Those academicians who chose to participate in the study did so voluntarily and had freedom to not to proceed at any point they felt no longer willing to proceed without any consequences. The survey monkey instrument had respondent identifier disabled so that it was not possible to track or follow the identity of a respondent. Therefore, there was protection and confidentiality of respondents. Ethical considerations also included

commitment to truthful reporting of data without manipulation.

## Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings of the study according to research questions. It begins with a presentation of demographic characteristics of respondents before the actual data analysis is done.

### Demographics of Respondents

As table 3 shows, the sample size included 175 respondents including administrators and council members of which 120 were males and 55 were females representing 68.6% and 31.4% respectively. Out of these, 2 respondents were under the age of 31, representing 1.1% while 74 respondents were between the age of 31 and 40 years of age which is 42.3%. Furthermore, 64 which is 36.6% were between 41 and 50 years old while 28 respondents comprising 16% were in the age group of between 51 and 60 years of age. The table shows that 7 respondents which stood for 4% were above the age of 60 years. This shows that respondents were predominantly between the age of 31 and 60 years old.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents**

Demographics		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	120	68.6
	Female	55	31.4
Age	Under 31	2	1.1
	31-40	74	42.3
	41-50	64	36.6
	51-60	28	16.0
	Above 60	7	4.0
Education	Bachelors	25	14.3
	Masters	97	55.4
	Doctoral	40	22.9
	Post-Doctoral	13	7.4
N = 175	Total	175	100.0

**Table 4: Correlations of Age Distribution and Council Autonomy**

N=175		Council Autonomy
Age Distribution	Pearson Correlation	.434
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

The table 3 further shows that all 175 respondents were university graduates with 25 (14.3%) respondents holding bachelor's degrees, 97 (55.4%) holding masters' degree, 40 (22.9%) holding doctoral degrees and 13 (7.4%) having post-doctoral education. This shows that respondents' education was chiefly above Bachelors' degree.

**Research Question 1:** Is there a significant relationship between age distribution and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils?

This research question called for testing of the following null hypothesis:  $H_01$ : There is no

significant correlation between age distribution and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils.

Table 4 presents the Pearson Correlation of .434 which is weak yet positive with the Sig of .000 which is lesser than the critical value (.05) which leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis, thus maintaining that there is a significant positive yet weak correlation between age distribution and the autonomy of faith-based University Council. This means that age diversity of council members slightly influences the autonomy of University councils under investigation. This appears to be consistent with what Platt and Platt (2012) found on the influence of age diversity on the effectiveness of corporate boards. This further confirms what Ahn and Walker (2007) argued that younger board

members are more likely to initiate strategic changes than older board members. Therefore, there is a need to diversify council membership in terms of age groups. Gutterman (2022) argues of embracing age diversity in the workplace which brings greater corporate benefits to the organization.

**Request Question 2:** Is there a significant relationship between gender diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils?

This research question called for testing of the following null hypothesis:  $H_0$ 1: There is no significant correlation between gender diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils.

**Table 5: Correlation of Gender Perceptions and Council Autonomy**

N=175		Council Autonomy
Gender Perception	Pearson Correlation	.458
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

**Table 6: Correlation of Gender Diversity and Council Autonomy**

N=175		Council Autonomy
Ethnic Diversity	Pearson Correlation	.357
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Table 5 presents the Pearson Correlation of .458 which is weak yet positive with the Sig of .000 which is lesser than the critical value (.05). This leads to rejection of the null hypothesis, thus maintaining that there is a significant positive yet weak correlation between gender diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils. This means that gender diversity slightly influenced the autonomy of University councils under investigation. This shows that gender considerations are critical in constituting university governing boards. Alvarado et al. (2011) found that gender diversity in boardrooms is associated with corporate profitability and business success. Likewise, Murrell and James (2001) established that gender considerations make better organizations in the future. According to Bibi (2016), organizations need to make policies that take care of gender concerns and inclusion in decision making. Therefore, gender diversity is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of university councils.

**Request Question 3:** Is there a significant relationship between ethnic diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils?

This research question called for testing of the following null hypothesis:  $H_0$ 1: There is no significant correlation between ethnic diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils.

Table 5 presents the Pearson Correlation of .357 which is weak yet positive with the Sig of .000 which is lesser than the critical value (.05) which leads to rejection of the null hypothesis, thus maintaining that there is a significant positive yet weak correlation between ethnic diversity and the autonomy of faith-based university Councils. This means that ethnic diversity slightly influenced the autonomy of University councils under investigation. The finding is in harmony with previous studies such as that of Yang et al., 2020 who established that divergent viewpoints in a team can result in team reflexivity. Singh (2007) found that boards that are more ethnically diverse tend to perform better than those which are not ethnically diverse. Oerlemans et al., (2009), on the other hand, found that ethnic diversity improves performance and Goyal et al. (2019) held that governance systems that encourage diversity experience improved performance. Therefore, the established

link between gender diversity and council autonomy links up with previous study findings.

### Overall Contribution of Age, Gender and Ethnicity toward Council Autonomy

According to table 7, the model summary of Council Autonomy and age, gender and ethnicity distribution of council members shows that there is

**Table 7: Model Summary for the Autonomy of the University Council**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R Std. Error of the Estimate
	.475 <sup>a</sup>	.226	.212	.51079

a. Predictors: (Constant), Ethnicity Perception, Gender Perceptions, Age Perception

This means that there must be other factor apart from age, gender and ethnic diversity that may predict the autonomy of the University councils under investigation, thus, calling for further studies to establish the factors. Therefore, the three predictor variables (age, gender and ethnicity) are important contributors to the Autonomy of the University Councils. This finding is supported by available literature. For instance, Platt and Platt (2012) observed that governing boards with a higher concentration of younger members than older members tends to venture into more financial risks of the governing board. Ahn and Walker (2007) contended that younger board members tend to be more associated with organizational changes than older members. It has also been found that female board members hardly miss on attending board meetings which shows that their commitment to board performance is higher than that of their male counterparts (Adams & Ferreira, 2009). Furthermore, literature shows that board ethnic diversity create good perspectives (Farrel & Hersch, 2005) and ethnically diverse boards tend to attract a diverse range of investors (Arfken et al. (2004).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusions

This study supports the existing literature that age mix should be considered when constituting a governing body of a higher education institution as having age diversity helps to keep the Council strategic and innovative which come with younger board members while the older ones keep the integrity and risk prevention attributes of the organization. The study further confirmed the role of gender in the appointment of the governing body of a college or university as gender mix brings different perspectives that enrich deliberations. Ethnic diversity is an important factor to be

moderate positive relationship between the depended variable and independent variables since the correlation coefficient is .48. This implies that age, gender and ethnicity diversity account for 22.6% of the effective council autonomy in Faith-based University Councils under investigation.

considered when constituting a University Council as the diversity provides unique opportunities for resource mobilization, enlisting international flavor and mitigating negative perceptions that comes from having members from one ethnic grouping. Therefore, ethnically diverse boards may attract equality diverse faculty, staff and students thereby creating internationalization.

### Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that those constituting University Councils should consider demographic the diversity as part of the criteria in coming up with University Council members. Particularly, considerations about gender, age and ethnic diversity are vital in ensuring that the governing councils are effective.

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