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# Peer Review Mechanisms: The Bottleneck of Academic Freedom

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## ***Abstract***

*Academic freedom in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) entails not only the protection of rights of faculty to teach and of students to learn, but also the freedom to create and disseminate knowledge. The literature, especially in Africa, mainly portrays the violation of academic freedom due to external interference into universities' autonomous functioning. However, this article, by focusing on academic publications and the peer review process, suggests that the internal governance of HEIs also has equally serious implications on academic freedom. By analyzing data collected from editors, reviewers and researchers of three research institutions that publish reputable journals at the Addis Ababa University, this article reveals that peer review mechanisms in academic institutions constrain the production of knowledge and, hence, undermine academic freedom.*

## **Introduction**

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have the duty of producing and disseminating academic publications in order to advance the frontiers of spheres of knowledge and address societal problems. HEIs' academic personnel are expected to relentlessly pursue truth (ask "Why?") look beyond conventional wisdom, and question received knowledge within their fields of study. Perhaps, there is no other institution in a society that is granted such a special role of seeking and sharing new knowledge and truth. Nonetheless, in many parts of the world, HEIs' personnel are often exposed to the risk of being denied their freedom of employing their individual acumen of searching for and sharing knowledge and truth. The role of HEIs to generate and publicize knowledge and the need for concomitant academic freedom, however, have earned worldwide recognition and are clearly stipulated in the policy document that the General Conference of the United Nations

Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted in 1997 concerning the Status of Higher- Education Teaching Personnel. In Africa, academics themselves have been largely involved in defining and interpreting the societal roles of HEIs and the concept of academic freedom through the adoption of declarations such as those of Lima Declaration (UN, 1988), Dar es Salaam (1990), and Kampala (1990).

Academic freedom, as pointed at in the literature, is an essential condition for the development of a vibrant and intellectual culture and its value is closely linked to the fundamental purposes and missions of modern universities - teaching and research. It is intended to protect the right of professors, in their teaching and research, to follow their ideas wherever they lead them (NEAR, 2003; Altbach, 2005), but the focus on academic freedom differs between countries (Altbach, 2005). For instance, in the United States, academic freedom mainly concerns the protection of the tenure system and assures faculty's meaningful role in the governance of colleges, while at the same time, ensuring that they adhere to a body of high scholarly standards. In African contexts, academic freedom is focused on guarding academic professionals against unpleasant forms of self-regulation and censorship and covers wide range of issues related to the challenges of institutional autonomy, ideological controls, internal governance, and intellectual freedom.

Among the various issues of academic freedom in the context of Africa, this paper focuses on one aspect of internal governance related to the knowledge creation and dissemination process where a faculty's academic publications pass through the peer-review mechanisms before they are released to the public.

## **Conceptualizing the Link between Peer Review and Academic Freedom**

The publication of research and scholarly papers in scientific journals is one means of expanding the frontiers of knowledge. Indeed, the editorial and peer review mechanisms are the bases for scholarly publication. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Advisory Commission on HE Statement (2001:3) defines peer evaluation as “the process by which academic peers at an institution and within the scholarly disciplines continually review and evaluate academic standards, content and procedures, as well as individual performance”. This definition broadly shows that faculty peer-evaluation in the HEIs is a self-regulating process that is employed not only in publishing but also in many other administrative functions.

The competitive nature of the academia coupled with the prestige and promotion that academic publications bring about grants academic publications review process a special position in the scholarly enterprise. Corroborating this fact, Dougherty (2005:191) compares the publications peer review process to “what the economists gracefully refer to as a ‘third-part compliance mechanism’ which allows a work to be recognized for its merit, validated from different perspectives”. Bigis (1990:150-151) also describes the multifaceted relationship between the author, editor and the reviewer as follows:

*Referees protect authors from editors-from their whims, biases, and ignorance-and protect readers from both... Ideally, the peer review process sifts out what would become the trivial, useless, and misleading components of “information overload”- a phenomenon which, in our time of proliferating publication, forms a peculiarly insidious constraint on intellectual freedom.*

Under peer review mechanism, there are two essential steps: the initial assessment of the editor or editorial board and the evaluation of the anonymous reviewer. The initial assessment the editor/the editorial board makes of the paper is always under the mercy of the fair and balanced judgment done on the author and the work. At the second stage, the board’s selection of the reviewers, to a certain extent, depends

on the personal attitude and trust of the knowledge, integrity and professionalism of the reviewers.

Hence, these two essential steps in the review process grant a special status to both the editor and the reviewers as “gatekeepers who monitor and construct the type and quality of new knowledge entering the field and, perhaps, advancing the work of allies; while preventing their competitors from getting published” in the words of Rojewski and Domenico (2004:7). In short, the researcher’s academic freedom to push the boundaries of sciences is limited by his/her ability to convince peer juries that the work done is technically sound and theoretically meaningful.

By and large, the literature (Rojewski and Domenico, 2004; Baez 2002; Biggs 1990) discusses both the constructive as well as the destructive aspects of peer review mechanism. Authors claim that peer review improves the quality of public editorial decisions, ensures privacy, protects candidates from embarrassment, promotes the practice of shared governance and maintains the standards of the journal as well as the discipline; however, it is at the same time believed to give way to systematic discrimination of some, allow subtle or not so subtle favoritism, decrease accountability and deny faculty the freedom of presenting unpopular views. Baez (2002) describes this situation as a paradox by saying:

*Is there a paradox here? That is, does confidentiality— the withholding of a “procedural” kind of knowledge, i.e., how decisions associated with the products of knowledge are made—further the search for a “substantive” kind of knowledge?*

The review process, a double-edged sword, although essential to reinforce the objective evaluation of the work, has a subjective element, too. As much as the peer review mechanism signifies collegiality, it is, at the same time, corruptible by lack of confidence and envy. In some cases, authors are not guaranteed any protection from reviewers’ subtle predispositions and their poor and unethical judgments. Moreover, anonymity in peer review does not guarantee that the process follows the

requisite quality; neither does it ensure that the reviewer is fully answerable to the decision s/he has passed to the editor, which may or may not be communicated to the author.

Based on the above conceptualization, this paper examines the extent to which peer review as practiced at Addis Ababa University which facilitates or undermines the production and dissemination of knowledge, thus helping the realization of academic freedom. It specifically analyzes accountability and transparency in peer review through narrative inquiry in order to be able to promote a reflective and inward looking attitude towards protecting the freedom that the scholarly community cherishes.

## **Methodology**

This study used both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data was collected using structured interview questions for two groups of interviewees. The first group comprised of the chief or in some cases the managing editors of the top three reputable journals at the University, namely, The Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES) published by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES); The Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE) published by the Institute of Educational Research (IER); and the Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR) published by the Institute of Development Research (IDR). These research institutions are known for the reputability of the journals they publish, by the University's standards, coupled with the long years of service that they have rendered to the scholarly community (45 years - IES, 40 years - IER, 36 years - IDR). The JES has been reputable for the last 43 years, the EJE for 19 years and the EJDR for 34 years. They have also established the expertise and tradition of the system of academic publications where the peer-review mechanisms hold a central role. The informants from these institutions are also believed to be reflective and self-judgmental in describing and explaining the procedures as well as the actual practices of the review process.

The second group of informants is AAU faculty who have had various roles in relation to the publishing tradition of these institutions and are thus familiar with the system – as authors of manuscripts for these journals, reviewers, ex-editors, current or ex-associate editors to one or more of these journals and, in a few cases, as members of a regional or international editorial board. In fact, one of the informants was an ex-chief editor of one of the journals and also the director of one of those institutions. Thus, two researchers from each institution were selected for this purpose. Moreover, a discussion was held with the Director for Research and Publications under the auspices of the Vice President for Research and the Dean of Graduate Program Students Office at AAU.

The interview questions generally focused on capturing details of the major issues pertaining to institutional governance in research and publication functions of these institutions. These are

- Accountability in terms of time management/efficiency, professionalism, integrity and institutional autonomy with regard to the appointment of editors;
- Transparency in terms of provision of essential information for journal authors as well as reviewers, role/responsibility identification, selection of reviewers and the communication between authors reviewers and editor;
- Implications on intellectual as well as academic freedom of faculty; and
- The extent of international collaboration in the peer review process.

The interview questions for the chief/managing editors focused on formal and institutional practices, while the questions for the researchers/authors focused on their own perception and experiences of the peer review mechanisms as well as the research publication process.

The secondary data were collected from the policy/guideline or criteria documents that the institutes have made available for authors and reviewers as well as for their own internal working system. The specific literature on the peer-review mechanisms from both local and international sources was consulted.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section deals with describing the data collected from the discussions held with researchers/reviewers and editors of the sample institutions as well as the policy documents of the research institutes under consideration.

### **Discussions with Editors of the Journals**

All the editors the author interviewed agree that 10-12 manuscripts, on average, are submitted for the bi-annual journals they publish out of which there an alleged acceptance of up to 80% of papers submitted to the EJDR, up to 60% to the JES and 50% to the EJE. In fact, acceptance of a manuscript for publication is a long process. It officially is said to take usually around 6 months, in the case of the JES, up to 1 year, in the case of the EJER, and in some cases up to 2 years or more in the case of the EJE. In all cases, the process involves a preliminary assessment made upon submission by the managing editor, for the EJDR, and the chief editor along with the Board members for the JES and the EJE.

When a manuscript is submitted for consideration and then for publication, it enters a series of decision-making processes that are particularly invisible to the author. In the main, the issue of viewing reviewers as exclusively accountable to the review mechanisms is difficult as most of the responsibility executed is highly dependent on the good will, trust and dedication that the members of the Board are entrusted with to accomplish the job.

In the publication process, accountability mainly lies in the hands of the Institute that publishes the journal, since it is responsible for the execution of routine activities of the process. However, both the reviewer, who often takes a long time to evaluate the manuscript, and the author herself or himself, who should expedite the process by promptly responding to the comments given, are also responsible for time lapses, albeit the blame on lack of efficiency often lies with the editor. Hence,



it would not be a surprise that an article can be published after 3 or 4 years of the actual data collection stage.

In all those institutions, the official mechanisms that check editors' accountability to the system are often lenient, although they submit regular financial reports to the Research Director's Office of the University as it assists their publications financially. In fact, it often happens that they rarely give copies of the published journals to the members of the Advisory Board. It is only by the approval of the President of the University that the Research Director's Office appoints the editor-in-chief among candidates who have been nominated by the Editorial Board or in some cases by the Institute's Board. It is also true that such nominations, in a few cases, have been totally rejected by the University's administration. However, all the editors maintained that there had not been any external (out of the University) interference in their duties.

It has also been learnt that all of the editors have an ex-official status and in two of the Institutions, i.e. the IER and the IDR, the chief editor is by de facto the Director of the Institution that publishes the Journal. Associate editors, with a recognized history of publications, are selected from faculties/colleges that are affiliated or are considered relevant to the research institution. In general, it can be said that these scholars who have assumed these posts carry out their responsibilities out of sheer devotion to the promotion of scholarly publications; otherwise, the return in terms of recognition for their scholarly contribution, is negligible.

Generally, papers published in peer-reviewed journals are held in high esteem by the academic community. Thus, the editors in order to make an informed public decision, depend heavily on the work that reviewers do in evaluating a manuscript even when they know that the later are busy persons, buried under their own loads of teaching, research, and publishing; and have all the malice and optimism of humankind. Editors often complain that solid and up-to-standard articles are very

difficult to receive by the year, particularly from amongst faculty, as much as reviewers with solid publishing history are hard to find.

Except the JES that claims to have a wider pool of reviewers from prominent 'Ethiopianist' institutions from the international community, the other two declared that they had never used their existing international collaboration for review purposes, except for the rare cases of the academic Ethiopian Diaspora in the international platform and have maintained their contacts with the University at home, for one reason or another. However, even in the case of the JES editor, obtaining information on the extent of the involvement of international peer-reviewers, along with the impact this has created on the mechanism, has been very difficult. The defensive reaction of the editor to display information on this particular item could either be a result of the strong conviction that the procedure should remain concealed or a cover-up of a possibly faulty procedure.

Moreover, it has been noticed that all the three editors have reservations on the lack of a sense of responsiveness and impartiality of most local reviewers. A significant number of local reviewers, who are trusted to be as competent as the authors, if not more, are reported to show a conflict of interest between advocating for individual interest, either the author's or their own, and maintaining the confidence the editor, who represents the Institution, has entrusted them with. The Editors reported that casual analyses of reviewers' written comments, which lack clarity and a logical flow of concepts, had revealed disguised intentions that could ultimately affect the decision the Editor would make regarding the status of the manuscript. This could be especially true if the negative feedback is given in an emotional manner. In actual practice, when deciding on the final disposition of a manuscript, the Chief Editor may work alone or in consultation with other Editors of the Board (Associate Editors). In general, the editorial policy they follow and the exposure of the chief editor to multi-disciplinary subjects as well as his/her editorial competence are found to be the major factors that determine the fate of manuscripts.

## **Discussions with Authors-cum-Reviewers**

In this section, authors' and reviewers' opinions on the review mechanisms are presented together for the simple reason that an author, at one time, can be a reviewer, at another or vice versa. It has been found natural for these interviewees not to compartmentalize their experiences as they narrate them and, hence, reporting from these players is hereby presented in a mixed mode, i.e. in the manner it has been reported with the expectation that it helps us to maintain the original sense of the discussion.

Authors of manuscripts, who also serve as reviewers, generally have the understanding that publishing an article in one of these journals is a process that usually takes between a year and two. It is a common complaint to hear that manuscripts spend from 6 months to 1 year, at the Editor's Office, before they are sent to reviewers. Rarely do articles get published 4 or 6 months after submission – and this happens only when there is no backlog of publishable papers, (in one case, such inside information was deliberately leaked out to the author), or the reviewer happened to be very prompt and positive.

Authors generally maintained that there had been quite a number of instances, particularly at the EJE and the EJDR, where a manuscript is submitted for review and nobody could trace it after 7 years of no communication between the author and the Editor, in one case; or nothing is known about its final status, in a few others. There was also an instance where the author had been requested to resubmit the manuscript a year after the first submission, as it was impossible to trace the assigned reviewer. In fact, an internal summary report which shows the status of submitted papers to one of the Institutions reveals that there had been 32 papers awaiting editorial decisions from 2002 to 2008. Most of these manuscripts are in the hands of reviewers or could have also been returned to their authors for revision and never come back to the Editor or had been lost in between. By and large, the authors have not witnessed a feedback system that employs a regular, formally written

communication regarding the status of their paper since submission. The absence of feedback from editors augments the authors' sense of insecurity on the mechanisms employed and, perhaps, triggers their sense of curiosity to know who the reviewer could be and what actually happens to the paper in due course of the process.

Half of the authors (three out of six) expressed their reservation and lack of trust in the existing system and showed their preference for international reviewers. They justified that if a paper is sent to an international reviewer, the chance that it is reviewed free of bias is very high. Authors also have the belief that there is a better sense of professionalism and academic competence in the international domain than the local setting, although they, at the same time, admit that penetrating the international circle and getting one's paper accepted for publication is quite a daunting task. In fact, 2 out of the 6 interviewees reported that their works that have been rejected in the local journals have been accepted for international publication.

Although authors have no influence, or comments to make, on the choice of reviewers, unlike the practice in some institutions in the North, they admit that there is a guideline for article submission which generally focuses on format related issues. They also reported that there had been no detail information on the contribution they made or the added value the manuscript has brought to the world of contemporary knowledge when their papers are accepted for publication. In fact, when rejected, authors usually do not receive a copy of the reviewer's comment. Hence, the chance that an author confronts or challenges the assessment made on his/her manuscript highly depends on his/her personality, and not on the system. As reviewers, they also reported that they had received guidelines for article assessment although the monitoring system to keep the timeline is lenient. It has also been mentioned that reviewers could be requested to review manuscripts that are too distant from their area of specialization or research interest, supposedly for lack of referees. In one instance, a potential reviewer, a development and public policy specialist, reported that he had been requested to review a paper on educational psychology.

On the same line, reviewers are heard criticizing the potential pestering and, in some cases, serious harassment from authors. It could be the general tone and content of reviewers' comments that often lead authors to take an antagonistic stance between themselves and reviewers. The general understanding is that although there is double-blinding (the names of both the author and the reviewer are unknown) to keep anonymity, the reviewer is likely to guess who the author is, particularly among faculty or local reviewers, given the familiarity with individual's specialty and research interest, style of writing and other subtle indications one may use. Coupled with the previously mentioned inquisitiveness of the author, it is generally agreed that anonymity in peer-review promotes a sense of tacit animosity, intimidation and rivalry, especially when both are basically striving for similar goals and recognition. Consequently, reviewers tend to develop a rather critical approach instead of being collaborative and constructive in their assessment. An entirely different scenario is that the reviewer could be too sympathetic towards the author for various reasons, and the review process may end up being an instrument for favoritism or at best, a less rigorous scrutiny of the manuscript. After all this trouble, reviewers complained that they had not received a letter of recognition for the service they render.

Reviewers are often selected according to information gathered through every plausible means, from personal knowledge to informally-generated institutional information that enables the profiling and the building of a formal referee database. However, they may not necessarily be first-rate and well-read academics who have state-of-the-art knowledge and the tolerance to accommodate differences. Consequently, researchers assume that, among many other factors, differences in opinion, school of thought or paradigm biases and field of study biases are factors that affect the chance that a manuscript gets published or not.

In addition, it has mainly been reported by authors that editors use the weakness of the system to favor some and to carefully avoid others from the showground. In fact, in one of the editorial Board's experience, there was a time where the Board

had decided to penalize the Managing Editor by denying him the right of publishing his articles in their journal since he was believed to have corrupted his position. However, this decision was not actually implemented for reasons that were not clear and convincing at the time.

## **Conclusions**

This discussion shows the impact of peer review on the freedom for research and publications in the case Institutions. The following section describes the major findings of the study.

A. Confidentiality in peer review is accepted as given and is assumed to serve neutrality in the knowledge production process. However, it has been revealed that the review process itself is biased since it is highly dependant on people's judgment (editors and reviewers) of what the existing knowledge should constitute, who and, in some cases, which field of study should contribute to its development and how knowledge construction should be designed. Thus, the added value that the peer-review mechanisms bring into the system falls under question.

B. The peer review mechanisms in particular and the function of research institutions in general suffer from a lack of the virtues of the establishment of a meritocratic system. Often times, directors of research institutes, editors and associate editors are appointed to such positions for reasons that are less academic. Hence, such individuals are expected to shoulder responsibilities that could be beyond their reach of experience, as they themselves may not know the pain and anxiety of generating research outcomes. As a result, it may not be any wonder if their evaluation of research products tends to be less academic and more geared towards other less relevant criteria.

C. In a typical African university environment, which severely suffers from lack of appropriate academic governance (Zelza 2003), the peer review

mechanisms cause additional delay and frustration in publishing research outputs which further inhibit individuals' as well as institutions' freedom. They also limit not only progress, but also hope of progress and place faculty at a disadvantage relative to colleague-competitors in their fields and in other parts of the world.

D. International collaborators are not often referred to as reviewers for partnership in research. There are many opportunities that such partnerships provide, one of which is the neutralization of the peer-review mechanisms, which, at the same time, facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills from most innovative and experienced institutions to less experienced ones. Thus, internationalization of research and scholarly collaboration is not promoted.

E. The lack of accountability and transparency limit and determine the type of knowledge to be produced. Such traditional mechanisms are prone to penalize non-conformity and novelty, which restrain intellectual freedom and retard the research environment as well as the teaching-learning process.

Some of the implications and recommendations derived from the above discussions are:

A. It is true that the peer-review mechanisms may deny writers the opportunity to publish in journals. Compounded with other inherent problems of the system, like repressive political and poor economic leadership in the country, the academic environment is less likely to develop an intellectual culture that has encouraged and cherished differences of opinion. The most obvious incongruity of such an exercise is the fact that it is self-imposed. In fact, to use the words of one of the informants, as he stated: "Peer-review is characterized as a 'self-inflicted destruction', given the current trend." However, one way of curbing such a trend would be the involvement

of international reviewers in the mechanism. Apart from neutralizing the bias, such a practice would enhance the exchange of research ideas and values of research culture with researchers in the international arena.

C. With the rapid changes and advancements of the knowledge age, it is time that universities of the South, particularly, value the importance of internationalization in their research and scholarly activities. Such institutions should be outward looking and exploit opportunities of international collaboration to develop an open system that encourages self-appraisal, exchange of ideas and accommodation of differences in opinion. University organizations need, within their daily tasks and supported by efficient information systems, to promote the creation of institutional cooperation networks to stimulate research and teaching within the current global world.

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