



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 the 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. This article, by focusing on academic publications and the peer review process, however, suggests that the internal governance of HEIs also has equally serious implications on academic freedom. By analyzing data collected from editors, reviewers and authors of three research institutions that publish journals at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, this article reveals that peer review mechanisms in academic institutions constrain the production of knowledge and hence undermine academic freedom.

Résumé

La liberté académique implique non seulement le droit des universitaires d'enseigner et des étudiants d'apprendre, mais aussi la liberté de créer et de diffuser des connaissances. En Afrique, la littérature dépeint les violations de liberté académique, en particulier en tant qu'interférences externes dans le fonctionnement des universités autonomes. En se concentrant sur les publications académiques et le processus d'examen par les pairs, cet article suggère cependant que la gouvernance interne des établissements d'enseignement supérieur a également de graves répercussions sur la liberté académique. En analysant les données recueillies auprès des éditeurs, des évaluateurs et des auteurs de trois institutions de recherche qui publient des revues à l'Université d'Addis-Ababa, cet article révèle que les mécanismes d'examen par les pairs dans les institutions académiques exercent des contraintes sur la production de connaissances et portent donc atteinte à la liberté académique.

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have the duty of producing and disseminating academic publications in order to advance the frontiers 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 which is granted such a special role of seeking and sharing new knowledge and truth.

Academic freedom, as pointed out in the literature (NEAR 2003, UNESCO 1997, Zeleza 2003), is an essential condition for the development of a vibrant 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). 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, have earned worldwide recognition and are clearly stipulated in the policy document that the General Conference of the 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 Dar es Salaam (1990), and Kampala (1990).

This article argues that the practice of peer review at Addis Ababa University has adversely affected the condition of academic freedom enjoyed by the faculty. To show this, an attempt is made to understand the practice of the peer-review mechanisms, from what is available in the extant literature. However, this is done with due consideration that the literature on this specific issue is drawn from the experience and scientific reflections of academics from the north, and not particularly from Africa, as it has been difficult to obtain research works on peer-review practices in the African context. The second section of the article examines the concept of academic freedom and its multi-faceted nature. The relation between these two cardinal concepts, and how the practice of peer-review enhances or erodes faculty's enjoyment of academic freedom, is also discussed in this part. Following this, the methodology section provides details of the sample cases considered for the study and major indicator variables and methods of

analysis the study employed. It specifically analyzes efficiency, accountability and transparency in peer review through narrative inquiry from sample respondents to the study. The third section provides discussions on the findings; and finally, the last section draws a conclusion by highlighting the possible implications and recommendations of the study. In general, the study intends to be able to promote a reflective and inward looking attitude towards protecting the freedom that the scholarly community cherishes.

The Peer-review Mechanisms

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 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, grants the 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 the peer review mechanism, there are two essential steps: the initial assessment of the editor or editorial board and the thorough evaluation of the anonymous reviewer. The initial assessment the editor/the editorial board makes of the paper is always at the mercy of the fair and balanced judgement the editor/s make of both 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 1991) discusses both the constructive as well as the destructive aspects of the 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 favouritism, 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 is believed to signify 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 judgements. 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, in the following section, the article examines the extent to which peer review as practised at Addis Ababa University facilitates or undermines the production and dissemination of knowledge, thus helping the realization of academic freedom or otherwise.

Conceptualizing Academic Freedom

Altbach (2001:20) characterizes the concept of academic freedom as ‘elusive’ and says that ‘while it seems a simple concept, and in essence is, academic freedom is difficult to define’. Explaining the concept further, he claims that a ‘universally accepted understanding’ for academic freedom is hard to find. Botsford (1998), on the other hand, believes that a comprehensive conception of academic freedom started in universities of ancient Greece. According to Crabtree (Crabtree 2000 in Bentley et al., 2006:14), the concept included the principle of freedom of enquiry within a rational intellectual system; and it referred not only to the ‘right to be free from interference’, but rather to the ‘duty to seek and speak the truth’.

The focus on academic freedom differs between countries (Altbach 2005). In the United States, for instance, 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. On the other hand, 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 (Zezeza 2003).

Even in Africa, the focus of conceptualization of the term varies amongst countries. A number of prominent South African scholars have engaged in attempts to clarify and sharpen the contemporary meaning of academic freedom (Zezeza 2003); however, such attempts, as useful as they are to portray the various facets to the concept, were limited by context. They emphasized the realities of apartheid, where state encroachment into the area of university education was ever-increasing.

In most other African countries, in the aftermath of independence, universities were established with the belief that they would bring about national development through the production of high-level manpower (Sall et al., 2005). These institutions relied heavily on state funding, and on foreign funding mediated by the new states, which called for the latter to involve themselves in academic affairs. Subsequently, in many African countries, the state has been seen extending its influence and occupying grounds that the then newly trained intellectuals might consider their own. Given the lack of challenge from independent forces of civil society and the increasing state of poverty of these countries, the 1980s and 1990s saw academic freedom becoming a subject of debate.

Although the content and conception of academic freedom depends on the context of each country, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) identified four focal areas of challenge to academic freedom in African universities (Bentley et al., 2006). These are challenges of institutional autonomy, ideological controls, internal governance, and intellectual authority. Furthermore, under internal governance, the council used Symonide's wide-ranging list of rights to conceptualize academic freedom. Amongst the six rights the document considers, two appear to specifically relate to the theme of this study, and these are:

- (a) The right to determine the subject and methods of research on the part of the academic community;
- (b) The right to seek, receive, obtain and impart information and ideas... (Bentley et al., 2006:15).

When relating academic freedom to the knowledge production process in HEIs, it is noted that one defining characteristic of a scientific contribution is that it must be communicated to other scientists. The publication of research and scholarly papers in scientific journals is a major means of communicating, thereby expanding the frontiers of knowledge. Otherwise, a theory or research results cannot inform the work of others or be subjected to rigorous scrutiny and possible disproof. Therefore, scientific publications remain the major means of communication as much as the editorial and peer review mechanisms have remained crucial to scientific publishing.

This analysis is explained by Yimam (in Assefa 2008), who showed the 'logical connection between the right to education and the context in which it is provided', and identifies three elements of academic freedom important in relation to knowledge production and dissemination in academically autonomous institutions. These are the rights to freely:

- (a) hold and express opinions;
- (b) associate with others; and
- (c) move and share opinions with associates (Yimam in Assefa 2008:20).

The process of peer review is justified because of the specialized nature of academic inquiry, which calls for peer researchers, who are active in the field and with similar expertise, to evaluate the originality, methodology and contributions of the work. Since peer review is believed to improve the quality of a research work, the scientific enterprise has sustained itself using this mechanism; however, it has also been argued that peer review has the potential to breed individual bias and result in breaches of ethical behaviour (Biggs 1991), thus constraining academic freedom.

Therefore, at the core of the right to academic freedom is the right of the individual to do research, to publish and to disseminate learning through publications. However, knowledge dissemination among scientists is dependent on the appropriate conduct of the peer-review process (Rojewski and Domenico 2004). Consequently, the specific individual rights of faculty that CHE has identified as cornerstones of academic freedom – ‘the rights to determine the subject and methods of research and the right to seek, receive, obtain and impart information and research ideas’ – are likely to be constrained in situations where peer review fails to remain as objective as it was intended to be.

This expensive price that science and the academia pay to maintain scholarship, because of adherence to the practice of peer-review, has critical impacts both on the development of scientific disciplines as well as the freedom of scientists to generate and share knowledge as has been exquisitely described by Biggs as follows:

For thoughts that cannot be voiced will less often be thought; subjects that cannot be published will virtually cease to be explored; and research approaches scorned will be abandoned. Self-censorship is necessary for the scholar wishing to succeed in academe. That this is so can largely be laid to the account of the peer review system (Biggs 1991:162).

Among the various issues of academic freedom in the context of Africa, this article 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. In situations where peer-review is performed with integrity, the scientific community enjoys the privilege of sharing one another’s knowledge and expertise. But in situations where peer-review is constrained, the academic right of the individual scientist-author – ‘to seek, receive, obtain and impart knowledge’ – is violated.

Methodology

This study used both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were collected using structured interview questions for three groups of interviewees.

The first group comprised of the chief or in some cases the managing editors of the top three reputable journals at AAU social science faculty. These journals are: *The Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (JES); *The Ethiopian Journal of Education* (EJE); and the *Ethiopian Journal of Development Research* (EJDR). Out of the seven journals that the university

publishes in the different disciplines of social science, the three top publications for this study are selected by the long years of service they have rendered to the university community and the continuity of publication history they have registered. These publications are affiliated with three prominent research institutions at AAU, as can be seen in the table below (Table 1), which have pioneered the scientific publication tradition and demonstrated prominence in establishing expertise in academic publication system where the peer-review mechanisms hold a central role. Particularly, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES), which was established in 1963, has gained international popularity due to the extended scholarly achievements it has made and the link it has established with recognized institutions in the North.

IES was established at a time when the reconstruction of Ethiopian history, culture and linguistic heritage was institutionalized and began to draw the attention of many scholars from the international circle, who valued the historiographical importance of the country (Pankhurst and Beyene 1990). At the same time, many African countries were gaining independence from colonialism and Ethiopia was designated to be the political capital of the continent. It was at this historical juncture that the institute, led by a number of expatriate scholars, mainly from Europe and the USA, started publishing the first scientific journal. It is documented that the first editorial board mainly comprised of expatriate academicians. Most of the authors whose names appeared in the first issues were also expatriate professors, individuals like Professor Harold Marcus and Professor Hammers Chmidt, although there were few young Ethiopian scholars too beginning their academic careers (Chojnacki 1990 in Pankhurst and Beyene 1990).

Thus, it can be argued that the culture of scientific publishing in the Ethiopian academic setting was introduced by expatriate personnel who were involved in establishing the institution itself. As a result, the criteria of editorial policies, and particularly the peer-review practices, were adopted from the countries from where the expatriates came. Although a detailed account of only one institute is given here, by way of revealing the historical background, it can be seen that the launching of other publications at AAU, and in fact at the regional universities also, is a replication of the policies and practices of IES.

Table 1: Selected Sample Publications at AAU

Journal	Affiliate Institution	Established since
Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES)	Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES)	1963
Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR)	Institute of Development Research (IDR)	1974
Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE)	Institute of Educational Research (IER)	1989

The second group of respondents comprised of AAU faculty who have served as reviewers for manuscripts. Three respondents were selected, based on the recommendations of editors from each journal. Given their experience and their close working relationship with reviewers, each editor identified two individual reviewers whom s/he considered would be appropriate in terms of their knowledge and experience in relation to the publishing tradition of these institutions. Finally, the researcher selected one out of the two recommended reviewers, based on convenience or availability.

The third group of respondents were six authors who had submitted manuscripts to these journals. The selection of these authors involved purposive identification of departments whose members frequently published in these journals. Accordingly, the Department of Psychology, the Institute of Language Studies, Departments of History, Sociology, Curriculum and Instructional Studies and the Institute of Development Studies were selected. Finally, based on their availability and consent, one author from each department was selected to be a sample respondent. The selection of these authors also tried to consider their years of experience as faculty members, their academic rank, degree of authorship in scientific publications and their level of qualification so that the group could consist of a balanced composition of respondents. Finally, a discussion was held with the Director of Research and Publications at the Vice President's Office in AAU.

Table 2: Description of Sample Respondents

No.	Respondents' Role Identity	Journal affiliation	Academic rank
1.	Author 1	Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE)	Professor
2.	Author 2	Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE)	Assistant Professor
3.	Reviewer	Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE)	Associate Professor
4.	Editor	Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE)	Assistant Professor
5.	Author 1	Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES)	Lecturer
6.	Author 2	Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES)	Assistant Professor
7.	Reviewer	Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES)	Associate Professor
8.	Editor	Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES)	Professor
9.	Author 1	Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR)	Lecturer
10.	Author 2	Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR)	Associate Professor
11.	Reviewer	Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR)	Assistant Professor
12.	Editor	Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR)	Assistant Professor
13.	Director of Research and Publications		Professor

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 were:

- 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 the journal authors as well as reviewers, role/responsibility identification, selection of reviewers and the communication between authors, reviewers and editors;
- Implications for intellectual as well as academic freedom of faculty.

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 experience 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, both for authors and reviewers as well as for their own internal working system. The specific literature on the peer review mechanisms, both from local as well as international sources, was consulted.

Findings and Discussion

This section deals with 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. Although the data collection was based on three categories of respondents (editors, reviewers and authors), the analysis below merged reviewers and authors into one group for the simple reason that it was technically difficult for both groups to clearly demarcate the role between the two while reflecting on the practice. An author, at one time, can be a reviewer at another or vice versa.

Discussions with Journal Editors

All the three editors agreed that, on the average, 10-12 manuscripts are submitted for the bi-annual journals they publish. Nonetheless, the three journals have different acceptance rates: while 80 per cent of papers submitted to EJDR are accepted for publication, JES and EJI accept up to 60 per cent and 50 per cent of the submissions respectively. There is also a difference in the time and actors involved in the publication process. Technically, it takes around six months in the case of JES, up to one year in the case of EJER, and in some cases up to two years or more in the case of EJE. The publication process involves a preliminary assessment made upon submission by the managing editor, for EJDR, and the chief editor along with Board members for JES and the EJE.

When a manuscript is submitted for consideration 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 goodwill, 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, reviewers, who often take long time to evaluate the manuscript, and authors, who should expedite the proc-

ess by promptly responding to the comments given, are responsible for time lapses, although the blame for a lack of efficiency often lies with the editors. One of the editor-respondents explains the problem as follows: 'Authors rush to blame editors for any delay in publication – it takes a clean conscience to consider how long a time they need to revise their own manuscripts once they are given comments...' Whoever takes the blame, it would not be a surprise that an article can be published after three or four years of the actual data collection stage, which makes the study obsolete.

According to the explanation of the Director of Research and Publications and also the reported experience of the editors, the official mechanisms that check editors' accountability to the system are often lenient, although they submit regular financial reports to the Research and Publications Office of the university as it assists their publications financially. In fact, it does happen that they rarely give copies of the published journals to the members of the advisory board, let alone report on the performance of the editorial board. It is with the approval of the president that the Research and Publications Office appoints editors-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 administration. However, all the editors maintain that there has not been any external (out of the university) interference in their duties.

It has also been learnt that, in all cases, there exists an *ex-officio* status and in two of the institutions, IER and IDR, the chief editor is *de facto* the director of the institution that publishes the journal. Associate editors, with a recognized history of publication, are selected from faculties/colleges that are in one way or another affiliated with the research institute. In general, it can be said that these scholars who assume 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 latter are busy persons, buried under their own loads of teaching, research and publishing; and have all the malice as well as optimism of humankind. Interviewed editors 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.

The JES claimed to have a wider pool of reviewers from prominent ‘Ethiopianist’ institutions in the international community, while the other two declared that they never used their existing international collaboration for review purposes, except for the rare cases of the academic Ethiopian Diaspora who have maintained their contacts with the university at home, for one reason or another.

Moreover, it has been noticed that all the three editors have reservations on the lack of sense of responsiveness and impartiality of most local reviewers. A significant number of local reviewers, who are trusted to be as competent as the author, are reported to show a conflict of interest between advocating individual interest, either the author’s or their own, and maintaining the confidence which the editor, who represents the institution, has entrusted them with. One editor particularly reported that ‘casual analyses of reviewers’ written comments, which lack clarity and a logical flow of concepts, 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, all editors attributed the editorial policy they follow and the exposure of the chief editor to multi-disciplinary subjects as well as his/her editorial competence to be the major factors that determine the fate of manuscripts.

In conclusion, it has been learnt that except for differences in rate of acceptance/rejection, appointment of editors, efficiency of process management and the specificities of the manuals they provide to their authors and reviewers, editors concur in many of the issues raised during the interview discussion.

Discussions with Authors-cum-Reviewers

In this section, the opinions of authors and reviewers regarding the review mechanisms are presented together. It has been found natural for these interviewees not to compartmentalize their experiences as they narrate them; and hence, reports from these respondents are presented in a mixed mode, in the manner they were articulated, in the expectation that it helps 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 one year and two. It is a common complaint to

hear that manuscripts spend from six months to a year at the editor's office before they are sent to reviewers. Rarely do articles get published four or six months after submission – and this happens only when there is no backlog of publishable papers, (in one case, such inside information was deliberately leaked to the author who managed to get his/her paper published soon after submission), or the reviewer happened to be very prompt and positive.

Four of the authors generally maintain that there were a number of instances, particularly at EJE and EJDR, where manuscripts submitted for review could not be traced after years of silence – in one case, there was a seven years gap in communication between the author and the editor. In a few other cases, it was difficult to identify the final status of the manuscript regarding the decision of the editorial board after a series of back and forth communications between the editor and the author. There was also a reported incidence where the author was requested to re-submit the manuscript a year after the first submission, as it was impossible to trace the reviewer assigned for review. In one other case, a manuscript was rejected without being reviewed though it had passed the preliminary evaluation of the editorial board.

In fact, an internal summary report which shows the status of submitted papers to one of the institutions revealed that there were 32 papers awaiting editorial decisions, all submitted between 2002 and 2009. Most of these manuscripts were in the hands of reviewers or could have also been returned to their authors for revision and never come back to the editor or have been lost in between. By and large, all the authors do not witness a feedback system that employs a regular, formally written communication regarding the status of their paper after submission. The absence of feedback from editors augments the authors' sense of insecurity regarding the mechanisms employed and perhaps triggers their sense of curiosity to know who the reviewer could be and what actually could happen to the paper in the course of the process. One of the respondents illustrated the peer-review process as follows:

It is like staying in a dark room – once you submit your paper, you have no clue whatever happens to it – until one day you learn that the choices are only two – it is either accepted on condition that you incorporate reviewers' comments or it is rejected. And you don't even know how long it takes to get this verdict...

Three of the authors have expressed their reservation and lack of trust in the existing system and have shown preference for international reviewers.

They justify this by claiming that if a paper is sent to an international reviewer, the chance that it is reviewed free of bias is very high. They believe 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, two out of the six author-interviewees, who have now managed to develop popular and credible readership amongst the academic community, admitted that their earlier works, in some cases, have been rejected for publication in local journals, but have been accepted for an international publication. In fact, one particular author narrated how his exposure to an academic circle in another country opened up an opportunity for him to publish in an international journal and to build his career, having hitherto had his manuscripts repeatedly rejected in one of these local journals. He described his experience by alluding to the biblical saying: 'One is never a messiah in his own homeland'.

Although authors have no influence, or comments to make, on the choice of reviewers, unlike the practice in some institutions in the North, they admitted that there is a guideline for article submission which generally focuses on format-related issues. All of them also reported that there was no detailed information on the contribution they have made or the added value the manuscript has brought to the world of contemporary knowledge when their papers were 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 depends much on his/her personality, and not on the system. As reviewers, all of them also reported that they receive guidelines for article assessment although the monitoring system to keep the time-line 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 was requested to review a paper on educational psychology: 'I was certain that the paper reached my table by mistake, but I couldn't trust my ears when I was later on told that the editor could find no better person than myself at the time and that I was expected to go through it somehow'.

On similar lines, one reviewer described the criticism, serious harassment and potential pestering he experienced from a number of authors who

apparently learnt or assumed that he reviewed their papers. It could be the general tone and specific contents of reviewers' comments that often lead authors to take an antagonistic stance toward 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 was generally agreed by most of the author-reviewers that anonymity in peer-review promotes a sense of intimidation, tacit rivalry and animosity, 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 described by one of the reviewers 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 preferential treatment and favouritism or at best, a less rigorous scrutiny of the manuscript. After all this, reviewers generally are heard complaining of not receiving any rewarding recognition for the service they render. While one of the editor-respondent believes that an 'honorarium erodes the norms of intellectual culture', the other reviewer-respondent said:

For me every time I am requested to review, I develop an approach-avoidance conflict. On the one hand, I deeply feel that it is my academic and professional obligation; but at the same time, I feel the time I spend reviewing a paper is worth spending on something more rewarding – not only in monetary terms, but also in the sense of avoiding the emotional burden that reviewing brings with it.

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.

Four of the authors concur on the opinion that editors use the weakness of the system to 'favour some and to carefully avoid others from the showground' (Biggs 1991:153). In fact, in one of the editorial board's experience, there has been a time where the board decided to penalize the man-

aging editor, by denying him the right of publishing his articles in the journal he was editing, since on account of accusations of corruption associated with favouritism along ethnic lines and/or close friendship ties. However, this decision was not actually implemented for reasons that were not clear and convincing at the time.

As a concluding remark, it would be worth quoting one of the authors who gave a rather balanced view about what the practice of peer-review should be:

Clearly, the peer-review process has attained remarkable symbolic value. It is, after all, what separates an academician's writings from ordinary products, but it should only be considered as a collective approval of one's work by colleagues in the same field. What the reviewers produce should be seen as consensus and not truth; and like any consensus, it becomes in part a matter of who the players are in reaching the consensus, and what forces are at work.

Conclusions and Implications

In this section, the findings will be discussed to analyse the practice of peer review at the institutes mentioned, and thereby derive conclusions on the freedom for research and publications in the cases studied. The following table gives a summary of findings and the section below the table describes important findings:

Table 3: Summary and Findings

Journal	Acceptance rate	Average time of formal announcement for acceptance of manuscripts	Reviewer selection	Editors' appointment	Guidelines for authors & reviewers	Accountability to AAU Management
Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES)	60%	6 months – 1 year (editors' claim) 1-2 years (authors' claim)	Editorial boards' reference to local researchers	Appointment of nominated candidates	Available	Yearly financial report only
Ethiopian Journal of Development Research (EJDR)	80%	Usually within a year (editors' claim) 1-2 years (authors' claim)	Editorial boards' reference to local & international researchers	Appointment of nominated candidates. Thee director of the institute is not the editor of the journal.	Available	Yearly financial report only
Ethiopian Journal of Education (EJE)	50%	1-2 years (editors' claim) Up to three years (authors' claim)	Editorial boards' reference to local researchers	Appointment of nominated candidates	Available	Yearly financial report only

As can be seen in the summary table above, most of the visible differences among the three publications lie in the routine reviewing procedures and not as such in the general organizational features of the institutes that conduct peer review. Therefore, the challenges of publishing in these journals as well as the implication of the same to academic freedom would not be markedly distinct, one from the other. Hence, the following conclusions were drawn:

- (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 dependent on people's judgement (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 peer-review mechanisms should bring to the system are questionable. As has been described by one of the respondents, the process is 'tainted with an inter-mixed feeling of lack of confidence and uncertainty that compromises quality of output at the expense of conformity among associates'. This respondent believes that 'for the peer-review mechanisms to work as desired, we need to replace our proletariat culture with a sound intellectual one'. The challenges of the peer-review mechanism discussed above confirms what has been stated in the literature regarding the impact of referees' bias to intellectual freedom (Biggs 1991) and the paradox of confidentiality (Baez 2002).
- (b) The peer review mechanisms in particular and the function of research institutions in general suffer from a lack of the virtues of a meritocratic system. It is possible, and has also been reported in the history of these institutes, that directors of research institutes, editors and associate editors were at times appointed to such positions for reasons that are less than academic. Hence, such individuals are expected to shoulder responsibilities that could be beyond their reach, 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. Therefore, in contexts where decisions on the fate of manuscripts are swayed by factors other than academic, the freedom of academicians 'to seek, receive, obtain and impart

knowledge’ is bound to be compromised. The above challenge of peer-review mechanisms also confirms Zeleza’s (2003:170) argument on the general deterioration of academic freedom in many African universities:

As resources once meant for teaching and research were frittered away in the conspicuous consumption of the university administrative elite, with their chauffeur-driven cars and special allowances, or filtered through a maze of patron-client networks that rewarded sycophants and marginalized independent-minded scholars, buildings decayed, libraries and laboratory facilities deteriorated, and the culture of learning and knowledge production degenerated.

- (c) In a typical African university environment, which suffers severely from a lack of appropriate academic governance (Zelza 2003), the peer-review mechanism causes additional delay and frustration in publishing research outputs which further inhibit individuals’ as well as institutions’ motivation for knowledge production. 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) Except for the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* whose history as well as diversity of associated disciplines caters for an audience from different backgrounds, the other two journals do not invite international collaborators as reviewers. There are many opportunities that such partnerships provide, one of which is the neutralization of the negative impacts 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, except for only one of these journals, is not promoted in the publication practice of these sample institutes.
- (e) Institutes’ lack of accountability and transparency limits and determines the type of knowledge to be produced, as has been corroborated by Biggs (1991). 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.

Thus, while recognizing the importance of peer-review in the publication process, this study concludes that its practice requires a thorough examina-

tion since it breeds a sense of insecurity and antagonism among the staff, as has been seen in the discussions held with sample study respondents. As a result of lack of fair and balanced system of governance of scientific publications, academics call for a constructive overhaul of the practice – one that allows them to cherish the freedom they would like to exercise.

Some of the implications and recommendations derived from the above discussion are the following:

- (a) The peer review mechanisms may deny writers the opportunity to publish in journals. As a result, compounded with other limiting cultural and economic conditions of the system, the academic environment is less likely to develop an intellectual culture that encourages and cherishes differences of opinion. Instead, the peer-review process could be made to defeat the purpose it stands for as it has been reported to breed underground politics amongst the staff. 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 respondents, peer-review is characterized as a 'self-inflicted destruction', given the current trend. However, one way of curbing such a trend would be the introduction of an open peer-review mechanism through the use of technology, thereby encouraging open debate among colleagues and researchers. Apart from neutralizing bias, such a practice would enhance the exchange of research ideas.
- (b) Furthermore, since publication facilitates validation of one's productivity, the academia considers publication as a key factor in its recognition of scholars. However, recognition usually implies credibility and increased access to resources, which facilitate research. In effect, the product of such practice would be bitter to writers in developing fields and younger scholars who have not yet developed strong institutional ties and the trust of the academia. Thus, it would be appropriate for publishing institutions to organize more frequent sessions of knowledge sharing where senior researchers share their experience with juniors and where collaborative research undertakings could be undertaken jointly among the staff. Besides, to inculcate more collegial values, these institutions need to draft a detailed and comprehensive manual on how to review a manuscript. Such a document may help reviewers revisit their values and provide useful, kind, responsible and constructive reviews to enhance the knowledge creation and dissemination process.

- (c) With the rapid changes and advancement of the knowledge age, universities are expected to value the importance of internationalization in their research and scholarly activities. Such institutions can exploit opportunities of international collaboration to develop an open system that encourages self-appraisal, exchange of ideas and accommodation of differences in opinion. And 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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