



## Ethical Leadership in Higher Education: Navigating the Dilemma of Academic Freedom vs. Institutional Reputation

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction/Main Objectives:** This study examines the impact of ethical decision-making by university leadership on academic freedom and institutional integrity in two Zimbabwean universities. **Background/Problems:** Empirical evidence on how ethical leadership in Zimbabwean higher education institutions manages tensions between academic freedom and institutional reputation remains limited. These challenges are intensified by limited resources, fragile governance frameworks, and government interference, which place pressure on institutional autonomy and leadership decision-making. **Novelty:** This study positions ethical leadership as a key perspective for understanding the persistent but understudied tension between academic freedom and institutional reputation in higher education institutions. **Research Methods:** A mixed-methods approach was employed. Data were collected through online interviews via Zoom and Microsoft Teams with eight university leaders and twenty academics (four leaders and ten academics from each institution). In addition, a semi-structured Google Form questionnaire gathered responses from 167 academics across the two universities. **Finding/Results:** The findings show significant government interference in institutional decision-making, particularly in state universities. Foreign researchers experience greater restrictions than citizens and permanent residents. University leadership often prioritises institutional reputation over academic freedom, limiting open communication and critical inquiry. The private university also lacks formal policies protecting academic freedom. **Conclusion:** Ethical leadership plays a critical role in addressing these challenges. The study recommends establishing clear ethical frameworks and leadership training programmes to safeguard academic freedom while maintaining institutional integrity.

## 1. Introduction

Ethical leadership has emerged as a vital issue within higher education systems globally, as universities progressively function in contexts marked by increased accountability, political oversight, market competition, and public visibility. Thus, higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to face growing ethical leadership dilemmas on balancing academic freedom with institutional reputation (Kayyali, 2025; LaRoche, 2021; Diamond, 2017). Academic freedom is fundamental to higher education, allowing researchers, educators, and students to explore inquiries, share ideas, and participate in critical discourses without the threat of censure or institutional interference (Altbach, 2001; Kayyali, 2022). It protects universities as environments of creativity, independent thought, and critical inquiry. Existing literature underscores similar issues on a global scale, associating them with overarching risks like authoritarianism and the erosion of democratic standards (Pirrie & Manum, 2024; Post & Pujol, 2024). However, HEIs encounter mounting pressure to safeguard their reputational integrity, frequently resulting in policies and practices that may curtail academic freedom (Garwe, 2019; Irrera, 2022). The conflict between academic independence and institutional reputation creates a complicated leadership challenge for ethical decision-making. This tension is more pronounced in the Global South particularly in Zimbabwe, where universities often operate under conditions of limited resources, fragile governance structures, and strong state involvement, intensifying pressures on institutional autonomy and leadership decision-making (Breit, 2019).

In Zimbabwe, these dynamics are clearly pronounced due to historical, political, and economic constraints, as well as a highly regulated higher education environment

(Zishiri, 2025). Section 61 of the Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression, encompassing scientific research and innovation; yet, Section 62, in contrast, limits access to information exclusively for citizens and permanent residents (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). This conflicting legal framework generates a gap permitting the Government to limit foreign researchers' activities under the pretense of legal adherence (Mushawatu, 2023).

University leaders face the ethical challenge of protecting academic freedom while simultaneously upholding institutional legitimacy, regulatory compliance, and public trust, positioning Zimbabwe as a vital context for examining ethical leadership in higher education. Notwithstanding constitutional assurances of academic freedom and the acknowledged significance of ethical leadership in higher education, Zimbabwean universities continue to encounter unresolved conflicts between the preservation of academic freedom and the protection of institutional reputation. The central issue this study addresses is the limited empirical, context-specific insights into how ethical leadership within Zimbabwean HEIs institutions navigates the conflict between academic freedom and institutional reputation, given the constraints of limited resources, precarious governance frameworks, and substantial government interference, which exacerbate pressures on institutional autonomy and leadership decision-making.

The study utilises Altbach's (2001) theory of academic freedom to examine the impact of leadership decisions on the balance between preserving academic freedom and maintaining institutional reputation. The study underscores its importance by contextualising the issue within the Zimbabwean higher education setting,

where universities leadership are under threat.

This study assumes that in politically sensitive and resource-constrained contexts such as Zimbabwe, the relationship between institutional reputation and academic freedom is particularly strained, a position that aligns with the findings of Zgaga (2012, 2023) and Lăzăroiu (2009).

The main research question for this study is: In what manner do ethical leaders within Zimbabwean higher education institutions manage the conflict between maintaining academic independence and safeguarding institutional reputation? To answer this research question, the researchers developed the following objectives:

- i) examine the role of ethical leadership in balancing academic freedom and institutional reputation in HEIs;
- ii) identify and evaluate the key ethical dilemmas faced by higher education leaders in managing academic freedom and institutional reputation; and
- iii) develop a model that can inform policy and practice to balance academic freedom and institutional reputation.

### *1.1 The study's contribution*

The study contributes practical insights for readers and higher education stakeholders regarding the ethical leadership challenges encountered by university leaders in balancing academic freedom with institutional reputation in the context of Zimbabwe where economic limitations, political sensitivities, and regulatory scrutiny are at play. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for higher education policymakers, to formulate context-sensitive governance frameworks, leadership codes of conduct, and accountability mechanisms that safeguard academic freedom while protecting

institutional credibility and public trust. This paper enhances the sparse empirical literature on ethical leadership in higher education within Zimbabwe and similar contexts, thereby advancing ethical leadership theory by demonstrating its functionality amid resource scarcity and political pressure, and offering a significant case for comparative research in the Global South higher education sector.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Theoretical Framework: Theory of Academic Freedom*

This study is grounded in Altbach's (2001) theory of academic freedom. The theory posits that academic freedom is a basic right in HEIs, allowing academics to carry out research, teach, and communicate ideas without unnecessary interference from any quarters of the community. The theory asserts that academic freedom is essential for promoting intellectual inquiry, critical thinking, and the advancement of knowledge for the betterment of the world. It further recognizes that this freedom is not unconditional and must be exerted within the confines of institutional and national regulations and societal norms, and this is supported by McCrae's (2011) study. According to the theory, the following are the fundamentals of academic freedom:

1. institutional autonomy-universities should operate independently from political, corporate, or ideological pressures,
2. freedom of research and publication: scholars should be able to conduct and disseminate research findings without fear of censorship,
3. freedom of expression: academics should be able to voice their opinions on public and institutional matters, and

4. freedom of teaching: faculty members should have autonomy over course content and pedagogical methods.

The theory further stresses that HEIs ought to cultivate an open yet accountable academic atmosphere, enabling academics to explore ideas openly while upholding professionalism (Mohammed & Cai, 2025). However, Mushawatu (2023) noted that HEIs in Zimbabwe frequently function within politically sensitive environments where government regulations and social expectations may constrain academic independence. Ethical leaders must manage these demands, opposing inappropriate political influence while safeguarding institutional survival and integrity. Altbach (2001) emphasizes challenges like government regulations, political meddling, financial limitations, and institutional influences that may restrict academic independence. Thus, Lyer and Suba (2019) found evidence supporting the politicization of HEIs, noting global instances where governments and other interested parties have influenced campuses through academics and militarization. State universities depend on financial support from governments, foundations, and corporate sponsors, which may result in external pressures to suppress contentious research.

HEIs' leadership must adopt open, egalitarian, and values-driven initiatives that protect academic freedom, maintain autonomy, and cultivate productive stakeholder collaborations while reducing reputational risks (Zvavahera, 2025). Achieving this equilibrium necessitates policies that safeguard faculty rights while maintaining institutional integrity. Zvavahera (2013) highlighted that a leadership crisis can exacerbate these challenges, potentially harming the institution and widening the gap between it

and its stakeholders. Therefore, it is essential to create clear academic freedom standards that set boundaries while preserving institutional integrity. Ultimately, ethical leadership guarantees the responsible exercise of academic freedom through ethical research norms and institutional policies.

## *2.2 Theoretical Framework: Theory of Academic Freedom*

The dilemma between academic independence and institutional reputation is central to ethical leadership in HEIs across the globe, and is more pronounced in the Global South, particularly Zimbabwe (Nguyen et al., 2025). In a study conducted by Galán-Muros and Blancas (2024) in Asia, they lamented the insufficient commitment of university leadership in balancing the need to protect academic autonomy with the obligation to maintain a positive public image, meet stakeholder expectations, and adhere to regulatory requirements.

Ethical leaders must navigate complex situations where faculty members' academic freedom might lead to controversial research, publications, or public statements that could challenge the institution's reputation. Leveille (2006) emphasizes that accountability in higher education has emerged as a significant global issue, as it is essential for maintaining sustainability and promoting growth in the face of escalating competition. Lyer and Suba (2019) discovered in their global study that the practices of the majority of institutions were repressive, ultimately compromising their integrity. This implies that most HEIs globally are encountering a growing multitude of restrictive legislative, regulatory, and leadership constraints on their autonomy. As Drew (2010) noted, challenges encompass disruptions to governance frameworks, academic and leadership issues, excessive financial

oversight, limitations on academic participation and programmes, and, at the most severe level, the criminalization of scholars and the militarization of educational institutions. An example is the amendments in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act (HEFOSA) in the United Kingdom, which now exclude students from the complaints mechanism. Because of these amendments, students are left voiceless (Government of the United Kingdom, 2025). Students should be included in this comprehensive initiative aimed at rectifying deficiencies in freedom of speech and academic freedom. Academics such as Westheimer (2025) contend that political leaders, specifically citing Donald Trump, the president of the United States of America, blatantly violate constitutional principles, stifle criticism, and undermine democratic protections. What is happening in the American higher education sector is likely to make previously stable institutions more vulnerable to attacks and control by state mechanisms.

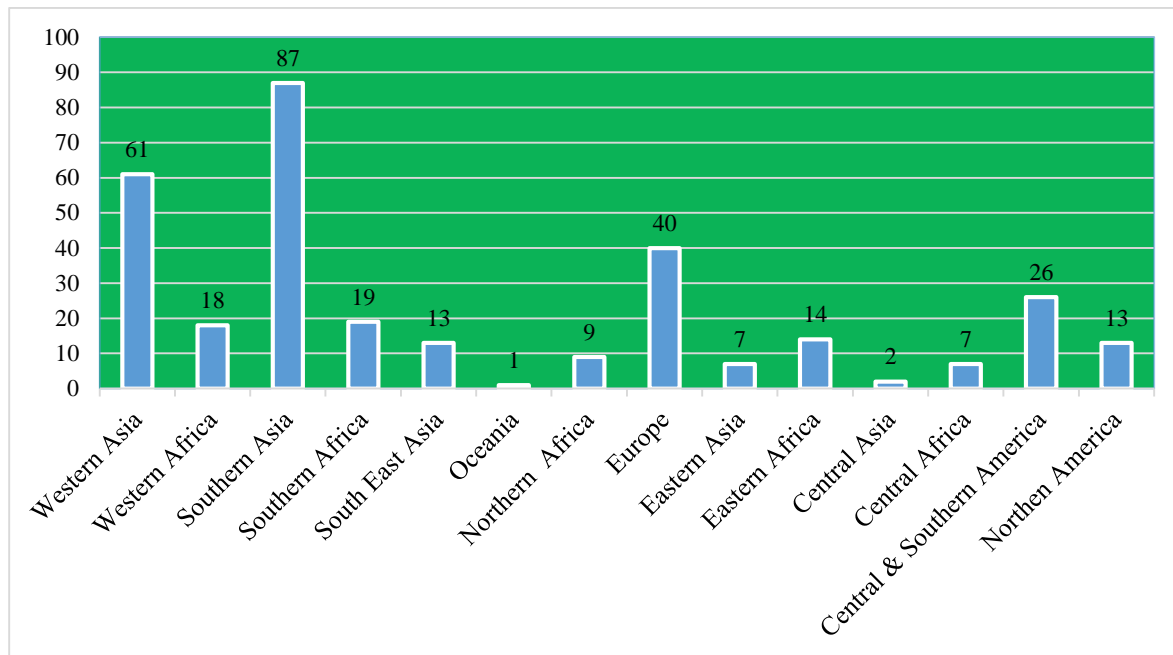
Apart from the situation that obtains in the United States of America, the attack on freedom of expression by politicians weakens higher education institutions in America and beyond. As the United States of America remains a dominant influence, this will increasingly shape the global higher education landscape. Autocrats and aspiring autocrats have attempted to subvert democratic norms in a growing number of countries, such as Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and India. Such interferences frequently compromise the capacity of universities to engage independently in teaching, research, and critical inquiry. The significance of understanding the scope of oppressive state activities is paramount, as university autonomy is intrinsically linked to the effective operation of democratic societies,

**Figure 1.** Number of violations of individuals' academic freedom in 2020 per region

transcending the interests of the institutions alone. Safeguarding academic freedom and institutional autonomy is vital (Mohamed, 2025).

The 2023 report on the Academic Freedom Index, which examined 179 countries, revealed a significant reduction in academic freedom across nearly all the investigated countries. Academic freedom is deteriorating in 152 countries, impacting about 50% of the global population. The Scholars at Risk Network (2022) documented 391 serious attacks on academics. This included beatings, killings, disappearances, loss of status, incarceration, prosecution, and travel restrictions (see Figure 1). Such attacks jeopardize the core principles of academic freedom and open inquiry, posing a significant threat to global democracy. It is concerning that academic freedom is also compromised in countries that claim to be the champions of democracy, particularly the United States of America. Literature reveals that academic freedom is not exclusive to particular places; rather, it is prevalent across Europe and North America, with the United States exemplifying a nation that purports to support democracy. Religious radicalisation has exacerbated an already polarized environment, posing substantial risks to academic freedom. In Europe, there have been observed instances of governments meddling and escalating pressure on universities to align with the goals of the state or wealthy benefactors (Asher, Thomas & Guillhot, 2010).

Figure 1 below shows the number of violations of individuals' academic freedoms in different regions as reported in the year 2020. The highest number is in South Asia (87%), and the least number is in the Oceania at 1%.



**Source:** Annual Report, Scholars at Risk

From the brief discussion above, global perspectives on ethical leadership in higher education highlight the intricate balance between fostering academic freedom and protecting institutional reputation. Concurrently, universities are obliged to uphold institutional reputation to attract students, secure funding, and establish partnerships for sustainability. Ethical leadership in academia necessitates principled decision-making grounded in integrity, equity, and responsibility (Kaduma, 2024; Gichuru, 2023). Ethical leaders should foster an environment that encourages intellectual research while ensuring that institutional regulations conform to societal norms and stakeholder expectations. Ethical leadership is guided by fundamental philosophical frameworks, such as deontological ethics, which focuses on obligations and principles, and consequentialist ethics, which highlights outcomes and effects (Barrow & Khandhar, 2023). In this regard, ethical leadership is essential in reconciling conflicting interests, guaranteeing that academic independence

does not undermine institutional integrity and vice versa.

### *2.3 Academic Freedom in HEIs in Zimbabwe*

Zimbabwe has a history of government interference in academic matters, affecting academic freedom. The country's challenges regarding academic freedom are deeply rooted in its colonial history. During the British colonial governance, the white-dominated administration at the time implemented diverse tactics to regulate academic speech, including the surveillance and expulsion of scholars and students considered subversive (Mushawatu, 2023). This interference was frequently aimed at aligning HEIs with government ideals and policies. Interestingly, the current government has continued with the same tactics to remain in power, suppressing the dissenting voices from HEIs. Because of this interference, academic freedom in Zimbabwean HEIs is presently at one of its lowest historical points in Sub-Saharan Africa (Academic Freedom Index, 2024). It is

imperative in democratic and free societies that students and academics seek education, research, and knowledge without the worry of repercussions. The repression of academic freedom has significant ramifications for human rights and education, as it restricts individual expression and hinders the advancement of a society that prioritizes information, critical thinking, and creativity.

Even though the Constitution of Zimbabwe explicitly delineates essential rights about education, academic freedom is tenuous and hindered by political meddling, economic difficulties, and legal uncertainties. Section 75 of the Constitution specifically articulates the right to education, stipulating that every citizen and permanent resident of Zimbabwe is entitled to receive it (Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, 2019).

Ethical leadership encounters difficulties in upholding integrity amidst political demands and institutional requirements (Kumar, 2024). Maintaining institutional credibility is essential during periods of economic and political turmoil, frequently resulting in strategic concessions regarding academic freedom (Bergan et al., 2020). When democracy falters in HEIs, individual liberties are jeopardized. Higher education leadership must reconcile the maintenance of academic independence with the safeguarding of institutional reputation, necessitating complex strategies and deliberate choices. The next section discusses the methodology of the study.

### 3. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study used a mixed research approach to examine ethical leadership in HEIs, in balancing academic independence and institutional reputation. A mixed methods design was the most appropriate for this study because it enabled the researchers to quantify perceptions and behaviors related to ethical leadership, while also exploring the

nuanced ethical tensions inherent in balancing academic freedom and institutional reputation. The integration of the results produced a deeper, more contextually grounded understanding that could inform policy, leadership practice, and ethical governance in higher education.

#### 3.1 Academic Freedom in HEIs in Zimbabwe

Data were collected through online interviews conducted via Zoom and Microsoft Teams with eight senior leaders from the two universities which participated in the study (four from each institution) and twenty academics (ten from each university). The academics were purposively selected based on having a minimum of 15 years of professional experience and their willingness to participate in the study. In addition, data were gathered from 167 academics across the two universities using a semi-structured Google Form questionnaire.

Data were collected from two universities, one private and one public, both from Zimbabwe. The combined academic staff population in the two universities was 212. The study employed invitation-based sampling to recruit 167 participants from the two universities. Given the sensitive nature of the study, pseudonyms Private University and Public University were used for the universities, 'P1-P20' for face-to-face interviews with academics, and 'L1-L8' for university senior management. The rationale was to protect the participants' identities.

Screening questions were employed at the beginning of the Google Form to ensure that only eligible participants progressed to the completion stage of the form. University leaders such as the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor/Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Dean, or Registrar were purposively invited to participate in the study. University leaders were essential participants in this research

because they create and implement policies concerning academic freedom, research ethics, and institutional reputation. Their first-hand experiences helped shed light on policies' effectiveness and limitations, as well as the ethical challenges of balancing academic independence and reputational concerns. The researchers also hoped that the study could benefit from their direct knowledge of how ethical decision-making processes unfold in the complex environment of higher education.

The study utilized email lists from these universities to contact potential respondents, resulting in the following participant counts from each institution:

1. Public university (n=107)
2. Private university (n=60)
3. University leadership from the two universities (n=8).

### 3.2 Ethical Considerations

All participants were apprised of the study's objectives and their rights before participation. Responses were anonymized to safeguard participants' identity and their institutional affiliations. Reflexivity and peer debriefing were employed to ensure an objective analysis and interpretation of the data.

### 3.3 Data validation

Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, involving senior leadership and academics from the two universities, thereby capturing diverse perspectives on ethical leadership, academic freedom, and institutional reputation. In addition, member checking was employed by sharing interview summaries with selected participants to confirm the accuracy and interpretation of their views.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes emerging from the interviews and responses from online questionnaires. Data were coded to reveal leadership strategies, ethical considerations, and institutional decision-making patterns. These findings were then presented in alignment with the study's objectives, integrating seamlessly with the emergent themes identified during data collection.

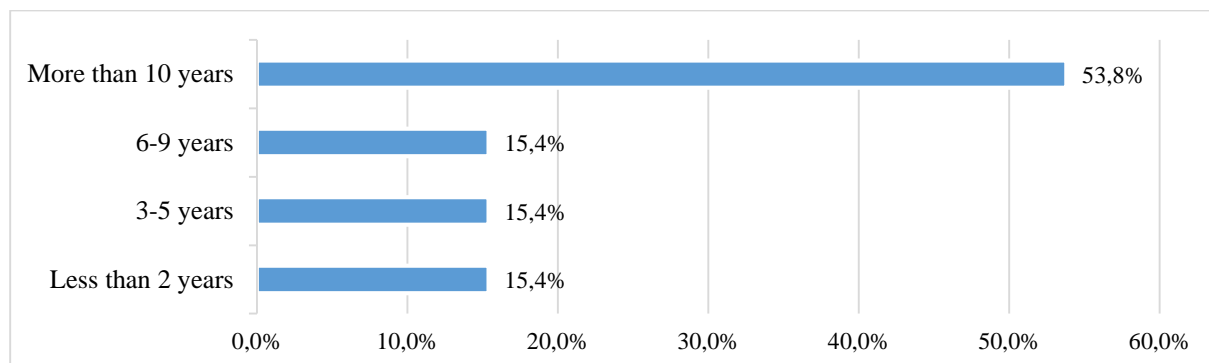
## 4. Result and Discussion

The study's findings are contextualized within the literature, theoretical framework, and the respondents' lived experiences, emotions, and attitudes regarding the conflict between academic freedom and institutional reputation.

### 4.1 Demographic Data

A total of 167 responses were obtained from 212 academics and eight universities leadership yielding a 79% response rate, which is deemed satisfactory for online surveys. The high response rate underscores the importance of the study's topic. The high response rate and diverse participation enhanced the credibility and significance of the study. Eight senior university management and 20 academics drawn from the two universities were interviewed via Zoom and Teams.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on their tenure at their current institutions. The majority (53.8%) had been associated with their institutions for over 10 years, while 15.4% claimed a tenure of 2-5 years, 15.4% indicated 6-10 years, and an additional 15.4% had less than 2 years of service. The statistics indicate that a significant number of the respondents possessed substantial knowledge and expertise on issues about academic freedom.

**Figure 2.** Number of years respondents affiliated with their institution

**Source:** Field data

In addition, 53.8% of the respondents had been associated with their institutions for over ten years, suggesting that a substantial majority maintain institutional memory and possess a deep understanding of the evolving relationship between academic freedom and institutional reputation. The researchers, therefore, hoped that these long-serving members are likely to have witnessed many leadership strategies and policy reviews, making them capable of assessing ethical leadership practices.

Conversely, the researchers also hoped that respondents with shorter tenures (those in the 2-5 years, and under two years categories) could provide innovative perspectives and a comparative understanding of ethical leadership based on experiences from different institutions. They may be more predisposed to examine traditional leadership methods and advocate for improved protection of academic freedom, particularly if they perceive institutional policies as restrictive.

The study suggests that the respondents' views on ethical leadership in HEIs may be affected by their level of institutional experience. Long-serving individuals may possess a more pragmatic viewpoint on the matter, acknowledging the need for balance,

while new members may challenge traditional norms and promote greater transparency and academic independence. The next section addresses the first objective of the study.

**Objective 1:** *The role of ethical leadership in balancing academic freedom and institutional reputation.*

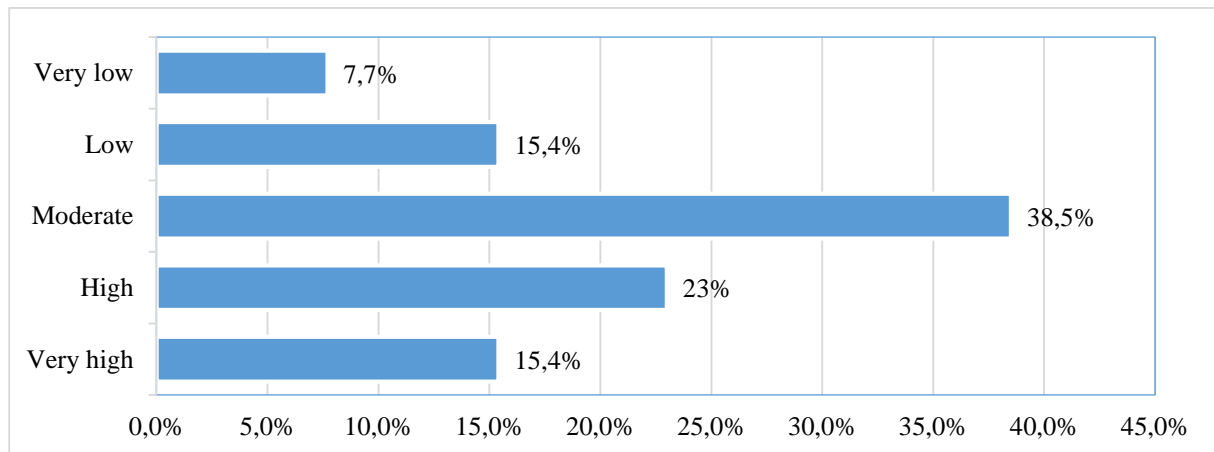
In the evaluation of ethical leadership within senior university leadership, 38.5% of respondents classified it as moderate, 23% as high, and 15.4% as very high. In contrast, 15.4% assessed it as low, and 7.7% as very low (see Figure 3). Virtual interviews with the academics indicated a consistent trend with online responses. P5 indicated,

*We are compelled to adhere to the norms and polices meticulously. One may be terminated for articulating an alternative viewpoint. Academic independence is non-existent here.*

P6 had this to say,

*I am not allowed to express my views as an expatriate. They say that it is contrary to the Constitution of the country.*

**Figure 3.** Rating the level of ethical leadership demonstrated



**Source:** Field data

Interviews with leadership at the two universities revealed strong support for academics and a limited suppression of their viewpoints. Additionally, the researchers noted that the private university lacked policies regarding academic freedom. Leader 1 (L1) indicated,

*We cannot put the name of the university into disrepute in the name of academic. It should be exercised within the confines of the law. At times, we are given directives by the higher authority. We make sacrifices when it comes to making decisions.*

The data regarding the perceived ethical leadership in decision-making revealed mixed feelings, showing both confidence and concerns among the respondents. This reflects a diverse impression among respondents, with a considerable segment regarding it favourably, while a large minority demonstrates diminished confidence in ethical leadership. Online interviews with academics highlighted concerns over academic freedom. Some felt compelled to rigidly conform to rules and regulations, fearing repercussions for voicing dissenting viewpoints. This indicates a constrictive atmosphere regarding academic expression and intellectual freedom. This may mean that ethical decision-making is compromised.

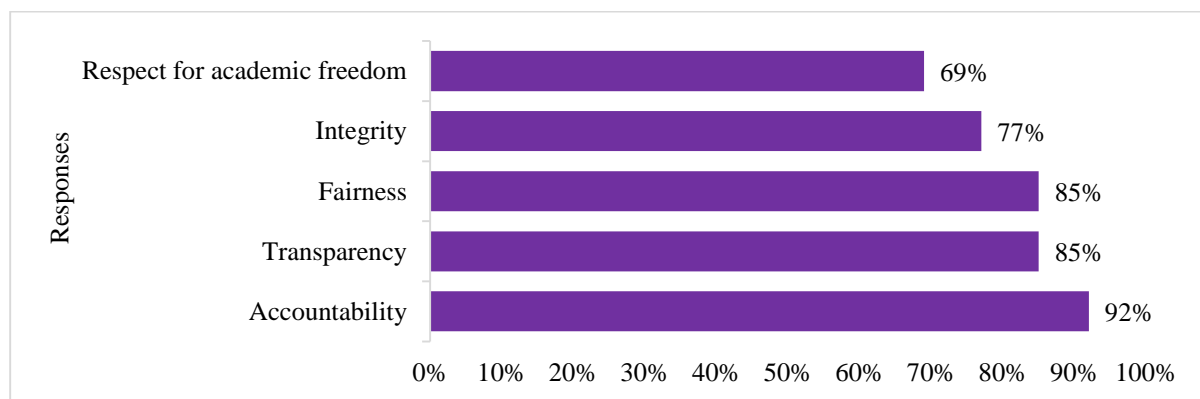
On the other hand, interviews with universities leadership revealed a supportive position regarding academics and their perspectives. Most of the leaders endorsed academic freedom; nevertheless, the private university allegedly lacked policies regarding this issue. This is contrary to the support articulated by most of the academics, including senior leadership, concerning freedom of expression. A lone voice from the leadership (L1) seems to acknowledge the delicate balancing act between promoting academic freedom, maintaining the university's reputation, adhering to legal requirements, and navigating external pressures. The statement reveals the complexity and compromises inherent in university governance, where ideal academic values may sometimes yield to pragmatic considerations.

The findings indicate varied perceptions of ethical leadership among university leaders. A considerable number regard it favourably; nonetheless, some raise concerns over its sufficiency, especially concerning academic freedom and the capacity to articulate divergent perspectives without fear of penalties. It suggests that university leadership may act as a proxy for the government, which contradicts the core

principles of the theoretical framework guiding this study, namely, institutional autonomy, freedom of research and publication, freedom of expression, and freedom of teaching, as outlined by Mushawatu (2023) and Altbach (2001).

Figure 4 illustrates the key ethical leadership attributes that are critical for leadership in

**Figure 4:** Ethical leadership qualities believed to be more important in HEIs



**Source:** Field data

The online interviews validated the responses obtained via the Google form. Nevertheless, ten of the interviewees indicated that these attributes were implemented only to a limited extent. Participant 11 (P11) stated,

*These qualities appear to be utilized solely when advantageous to leadership. I was once attacked for opposing university policies that I consider oppressive. Consequently, I no longer access research funds from my university. I am immobilized. Currently, as academics, have become mute, employing many strategies to maintain our silence.*

Another participant (P17) indicated,

*I presented a paper on the economic status of our country, and a week later, I began receiving numerous calls from unidentified numbers containing threats. I no longer experience a sense of safety. I assume that government agents have penetrated higher education institutions to suppress dissenting voices. The state's interference is concerning,*

and currently, no one is protecting us. Leadership is quite about it.

HEIs. It emerged that 92% of the respondents identified accountability as a priority, with transparency and fairness each at 85%. Furthermore, 77% underscored integrity, and 69% acknowledged respect for academic freedom as a fundamental leadership quality.

*and currently, no one is protecting us. Leadership is quite about it.*

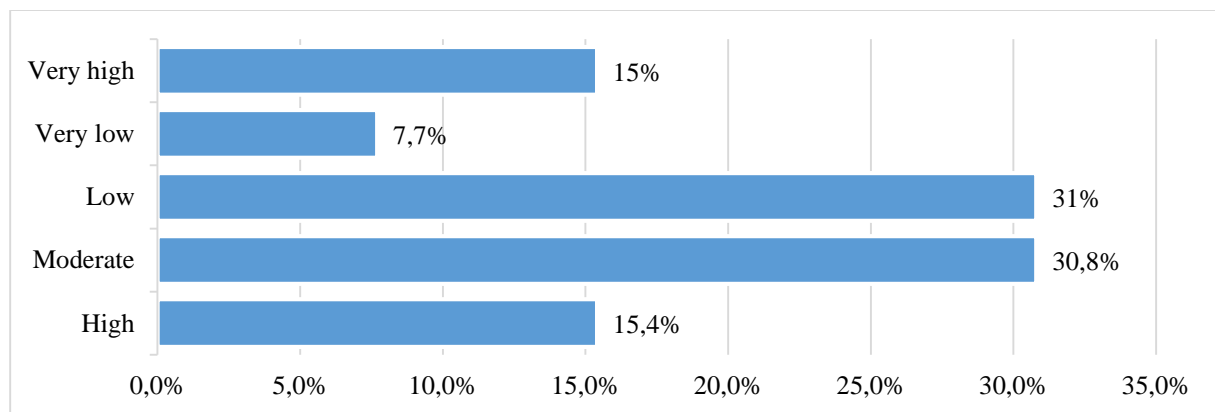
While the online interviews confirmed responses from the Google Form responses, ten of the participants noted that the qualities associated with ethical leadership were only partially practiced. This suggests that the ideal values of ethical leadership and scholarship might not always be consistently upheld. Participant 11 (P11) shared a personal experience in which voicing concerns about university policies resulted in adverse consequences. After criticizing what was perceived as oppressive policies, this individual was excluded from receiving research funding, which he attributed to his critical views on the institution's policies. This suggests that academic freedom and critical views are not always tolerated and can lead to professional and financial consequences for those who challenge the status quo. The reference to "everyone is now quiet" indicates a culture of fear and self-

ensorship that has taken root, likely due to the strategies employed by those in power to silence critics. This corroborates Mushawatu's (2023) assertion that the British colonial administration in Zimbabwe employed similar tactics to manage dissenting voices, including the surveillance and expulsion of scholars and students deemed disruptive. This is further supported by Westheimer's (2025) argument that countries like the United States of America

undermine constitutional principles essential for democracy. This underscores a significant global concern.

Regarding academic freedom levels in the two institutions, 30.8% indicated low levels, 15.4% indicated very high levels, another 15.4% indicated high levels, 30.8% indicated moderate levels, and 7.7% indicated very low levels (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Level of academic freedom in your institution



**Source:** Field data

Seventeen (17) out of the 20 online interviews with academics reported low to very low levels of academic freedom, while the remaining three indicated moderate levels. P20 stated, "There is no freedom here. If you persist, this may affect your promotion." In contrast, P4 mentioned, "We do not have any issues here. We are doing well." Further discussions revealed that P4 was from a private university where they had the freedom to do research and share their opinions without interference. Interestingly, all the eight institutional leaders asserted that they were doing their best to uphold high ethical standards in decision-making. Leader 5 (L5) stated,

*While we uphold academic freedom, it must align with university regulations. Freedom should have limits; otherwise, we risk*

*creating ungovernable institutions. Academics must act as responsible citizens.*

This perspective suggests that while academic freedom is recognized, it is not absolute and must operate within institutional boundaries. Notably, in the private university, despite lacking a formal policy, reported exceptionally high levels of academic freedom. This raises a critical question: How can academic freedom thrive in institutions that lack clear policies to guide it?

The online interview responses further emphasize the diverse views on academic freedom. Seventeen of the twenty online interviewees indicated low to extremely low degrees of academic freedom, whereas three respondents reported moderate levels. This

signifies a persistent tendency towards curtailed academic freedom, possibly attributable to institutional pressures, leadership choices, or external factors. L5 implied that unrestricted freedom could lead to disorder, potentially undermining the stability and governance of the university.

This stance reflects a more controlled approach to academic freedom, where regulation is seen as necessary to maintain institutional order and responsibility among academics. However, it also raises concerns about the extent to which such regulations may restrict intellectual independence and critical inquiry. This corroborates the claims of Kumar (2024) and Bergan et al. (2020) that institutional leadership encounters challenges in reconciling ethical integrity with the preservation of institutional reputation, especially in the context of political pressures and institutional requirements. Notably, the institutional leaders, although recognizing the challenges, frequently asserted that they were striving to maintain high standards. This indicates that leaders could view their approaches as consistent with preserving academic integrity, even if it necessitates restricting certain elements of academic freedom.

The divergent statements from respondents P20 and P4 underscore the inconsistency in experiences. Participant P20 asserts, "Freedom is absent here. Your persistence may jeopardize your advancement," highlighting a distinct conflict between institutional expectations and individual academic independence. Conversely, P4's more optimistic perspective, "We do not have any issues here and we are doing well," indicates

a more regulated environment, potentially shaped by P4's affiliation with a private university, which may own distinct governance frameworks or agendas.

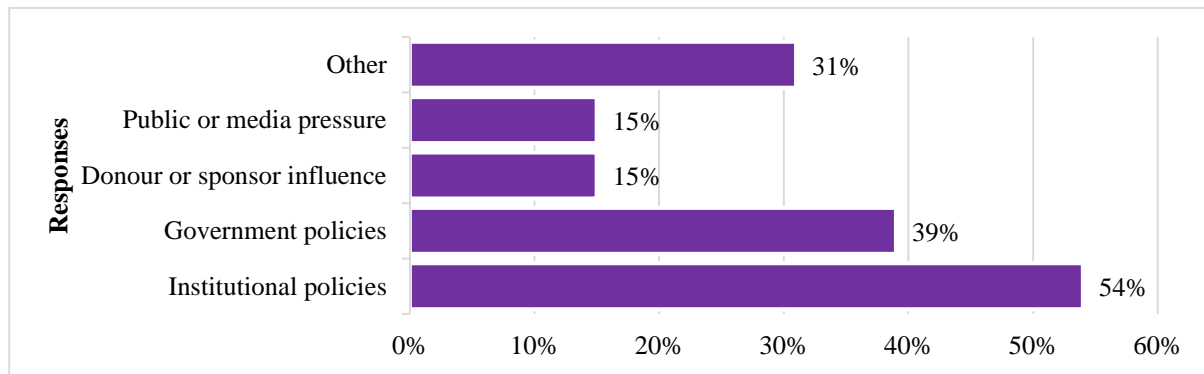
The finding that the private university lacking official academic freedom policies had exceptionally high levels of academic freedom poses a critical inquiry. This institution's absence of official policies undermines the belief that explicit guidelines are essential for fostering academic independence. This paradox prompts an examination of the effectiveness of academic freedom in the absence of regulations and whether elements such as institutional culture or leadership style are more influential in promoting or constraining academic freedom.

**Objective 2:** *Identifying and evaluating the key ethical dilemmas faced by higher education leaders in managing academic freedom and institutional reputation.*

Figure 6 illustrates the principal variables that impose limitations on academic freedom in the institutions under the study. Institutional policies were referenced by 54% of the respondents, whereas government policies were noted by 39%. Furthermore, 31% recognized alternative variables, while 15% cited donor/sponsor influence, and an equivalent 15% ascribed limitations to public media pressure. Participant P20 said,

*When we have some issues, we are not consulted. A penalty is just imposed. Based on the ethical practices, the course of action that upholds ethical principles is not always followed.*

**Figure 6.** Primary reasons for restriction



**Source:** Field data

P15 noted that decisions made were often inconsistent with institutional values and failed to withstand *external criticism*. Another academic remarked, "There is a lack of transparency, which impacts both academic freedom and contributions to democracy."

Participant L3 stated,

*In my institution, we strive to ensure that all issues are handled professionally because our academic staff are our ambassadors.*

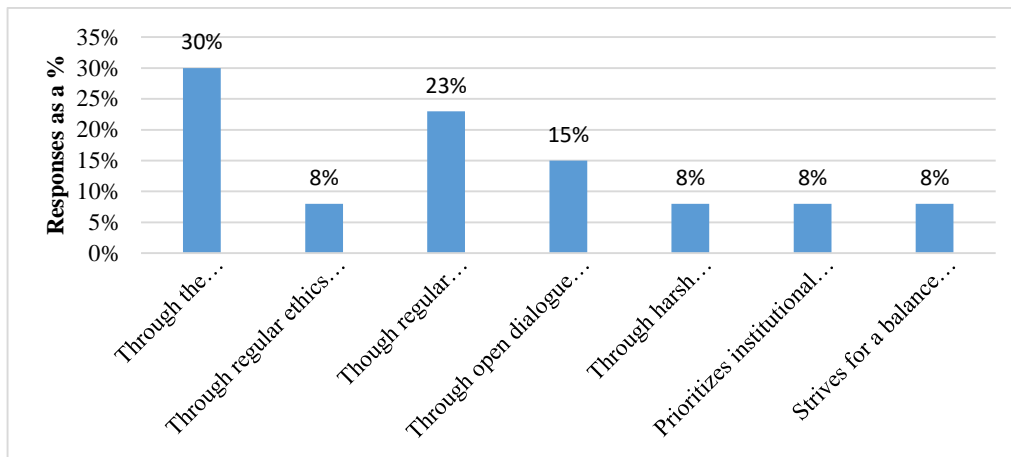
This data is corroborated by qualitative views from online interviews. P20 articulated dissatisfaction with decision-making processes, indicating that faculty members were frequently omitted from consultations: "When we encounter issues, we are not consulted. A penultimate choice is only imposed." Participant P20 emphasized ethical considerations, indicating that decisions often deviate from ethical norms, hence undermining institutional and individual integrity.

Participant P15 similarly observed that decision-making processes often diverge

from institutional ideals, making them susceptible to external criticism. This discrepancy erodes confidence and openness. Another participant highlighted the overarching implications, asserting that the absence of transparency undermines both academic freedom and democratic engagement. Positively, L3 demonstrated a pro-active approach, emphasizing professionalism and highlighting the importance of academics as ambassadors of the institution. This perspective, where university leaders regard academics as ambassadors of their institutions, is encouraging. The findings underscore a complex interaction of internal and external variables that constrain academic freedom, with institutional governance, ethical compliance, openness, and stakeholder influence identified as critical areas for additional examination.

**Objective 3:** Assess the impact of institutional policies and governance frameworks on academic freedom and ethical leadership

**Figure 7.** Handling of academic freedom in the institutions



**Source:** Field data

Figure 7 illustrates how the institutions handle academic freedom and institutional reputation issues in the context of social media. Thirty percent (30%) of the respondents indicated that their institutions addressed issues of academic freedom and institutional reputation concerning social media through clear policies on academic freedom and ethical decision-making. Another 23% emphasized the importance of regular staff training on navigating the intersection of social media and institutional integrity. Open dialogue between staff and institutional management was cited by 15% as a key approach. Additionally, 8% highlighted the effectiveness of regular ethics training for institutional leadership, while another 8% favoured implementing harsh penalties for violations of institutional integrity policies. A further 8% reported that their institutions strive to achieve a balance between academic freedom and reputation, with the remaining 8% prioritizing institutional reputation over academic freedom.

P15 indicated,

*Having well-defined policies regarding the use of social media is crucial. What I mean by this is the ideal scenario. It is more of a hopeful aspiration.*

L5 said,

*At my institution, we strive to ensure that academics can freely voice their opinions without apprehension. As a government entity, there are instances where government intervention occurs if they perceive actions by the institution as damaging to both government and institutional reputation.*

L8 stated,

*We have not recognized social media as an official communication platform. If any staff member chooses to use it, they do so at their own risk.*

When questioned about the institution's use of platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, which have become standard communication tools globally, his response was direct: "Remember, each institution has its own rules and regulations. This is who we are." This statement highlights the complexity surrounding ethical decision-making within different institutions.

The findings suggest that the leadership recognizes the importance of establishing formal guidelines to navigate the challenges posed by social media. The respondents highlighted regular staff training as a key approach to help employees understand the intersection of social media use and institutional integrity. This reflects an emphasis on equipping staff with the

knowledge and skills needed to engage responsibly on digital platforms. The qualitative insights provided by participants further illuminate these findings. Participant P15 stressed the importance of having "well-defined policies regarding the use of social media," although they acknowledged that this remains more of an aspiration than a reality in their institution. This highlights the gap between policy formulation and practical implementation.

A leader (L5) emphasized their institution's efforts to create a safe environment where academics can express their opinions without fear. However, they acknowledged that, as a government-affiliated institution, there are instances when government intervention occurs if certain actions are perceived as harmful to both the government and the institutional reputation. This underscores the delicate balance between academic freedom and political influence. The lack of acceptance of social media by some institutions reflects the diverse and often institution-specific approaches to managing social media, highlighting varying levels of engagement and regulatory strictness.

Overall, these findings highlight the multifaceted challenges institutions face in balancing academic freedom, ethical practices, and reputational concerns in the era of social media, which is not easily controlled. Key themes include the need for clear policies, ongoing ethics training, open communication, and careful navigation of external pressures such as government influence. The model that might be used to address the decision-making dilemmas in HEIs in Zimbabwe and comparable situations is covered in the following sections.

This study, albeit located in the Zimbabwean higher education environment, employs a

mixed-methods strategy that improves the analytical and theoretical applicability of the findings to analogous situations, rather than facilitating statistical generalization. The integration of qualitative and quantitative evidence facilitates the identification of fundamental ethical leadership patterns, governance tensions, and institutional responses prevalent in higher education systems in the Global South, especially those marked by regulatory oversight, political sensitivity, and resource limitations. The study provides transferable insights by contextualizing the findings within broader conceptions of ethical leadership, academic freedom, and institutional reputation, which might guide policy and practice in similar developing and transitional higher education settings beyond Zimbabwe.

#### *4.2 Limitations of The Study*

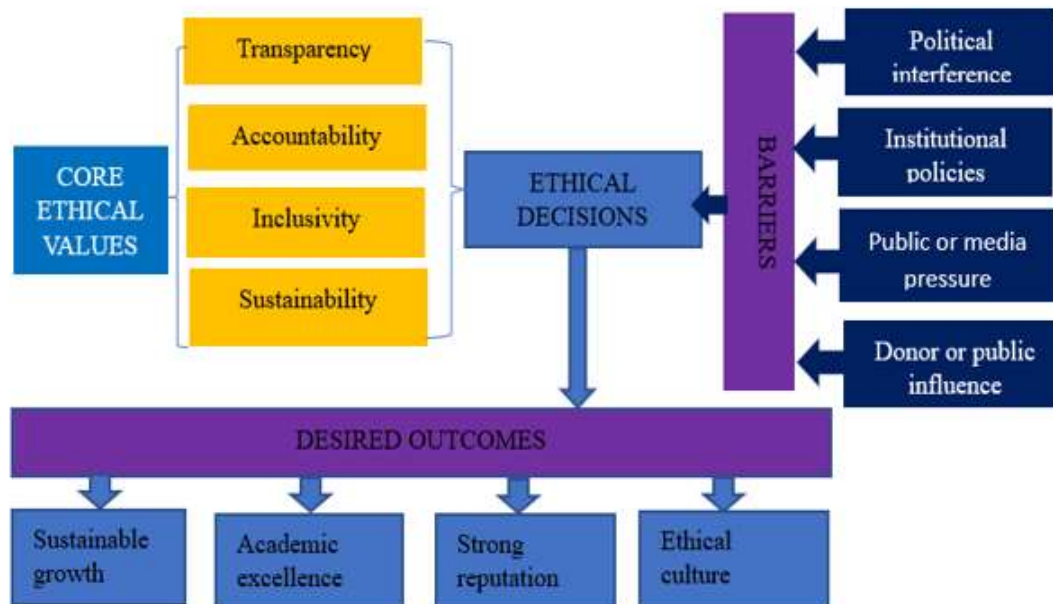
The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. Its focus on the Zimbabwean higher education context may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings with different governance and regulatory environments. The reliance on self-reported data on a sensitive topic such as ethical leadership and academic freedom may also introduce social desirability bias and constrain participant openness. In addition, the scope of institutional coverage and the use of a cross-sectional design may limit the ability to capture sector-wide diversity and changes in ethical leadership practices over time. Future research could address these limitations by adopting comparative or cross-country approaches, expanding institutional samples, triangulating data sources, and employing longitudinal and multi-theoretical frameworks to deepen understanding of ethical leadership in higher education.

#### *4.3 The Ethical Decision-making Model in HEIs*

Figure 8 illustrates the fundamental elements and processes of ethical decision-making within HEIs. Core ethical values underscore that ethical decisions must be grounded in

fundamental principles: transparency, accountability, inclusion, and sustainability, which are essential for cultivating a healthy and ethical academic environment.

**Figure 7.** The fundamental elements and processes of ethical



Ethical decisions denote the decision-making process that must incorporate ethical considerations. It is the central issue where leaders must manage the intricacies of reconciling academic independence with institutional reputation. Barriers underscore the challenges that hinder the ethical decision-making process. The primary factors highlighted in this study are political involvement, institutional policies, public or media pressure, and donor or public influence, which represent external and internal forces that might undermine ethical decision-making.

Desired outcomes signify the objectives that ethical leadership seeks to attain. The desired results are sustainable growth, academic excellence, a robust reputation, and an ethical culture, all of which are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

The model provides a framework for understanding ethical dilemmas

encountered by leaders in HEIs. It emphasizes the significance of upholding fundamental ethical ideals, which should serve as the guiding principles in decision-making. Leaders must recognize the influences that can undermine ethical decisions. Attaining a balance between academic autonomy and institutional reputation is essential for the enduring success and integrity of an institution. The model serves as a critical framework for analyzing and resolving the many ethical dilemmas HEIs encounter. It underscores the necessity for ethical leadership that promotes academic freedom and institutional integrity while addressing the diverse challenges that may hinder these objectives.

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study has revealed that in Zimbabwe, the government's involvement in state universities is evident, often influencing institutional policies and decision-making. In some cases, university leadership prioritizes institutional reputation over academic freedom, restricting open dialogue and critical inquiry. The state university does not accept social media as a platform for communication in the technologically driven work environments. Additionally, the private university operates without guidelines to safeguard academic freedom, leaving academics to external pressures.

The findings from this study corroborate what is happening in HEIs globally, for instance, in American universities. This could be worse in countries that are not politically stable. As a result, most academics believe that academic freedom is under threat, with government actions playing a significant role in limiting independent thought and scholarly expression. The institutions examined in the study appeared to lack the key pillars of academic freedom, namely institutional autonomy, freedom of research and publication, freedom of expression, and freedom of teaching.

### 5.1 Suggestions

The findings from this study corroborate what is happening in HEIs globally, for instance, in American universities. This could be worse in countries that are not politically stable. As a result, most academics believe that academic freedom is under threat, with government actions playing a significant role in limiting independent thought and scholarly expression. The institutions examined in the study appeared to lack the key pillars of academic freedom, namely institutional autonomy, freedom of research and publication, freedom of expression, and freedom of teaching.

The study proposes the following suggestions to improve academic freedom and institutional integrity in HEIs in Zimbabwe and beyond:

1. Governments and HEIs should acknowledge the significance of academic freedom as an essential element of flourishing democratic societies and implement measures to guarantee that universities function without political influence;
2. Universities should cultivate ethical leaders;
3. HEIs should ensure accountability and transparency;
4. Universities should foster a culture of open inquiry and respectful dialogue;
5. Universities should invest in reputation management programs;
6. HEIs should establish clear policies that define the boundaries of academic freedom while ensuring they align with the institution's values and mission;
7. Universities should develop and implement crisis management plans to address any incidents that may arise; and
8. Academics and university leadership should promote a culture of ethical behaviour and integrity within the university space.

### 5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the understanding of ethical leadership by situating it within the unique framework of a developing nation, Zimbabwe, which is characterized by unique political and economic dynamics. Specifically, the study addresses the challenge of reconciling academic freedom with institutional reputation in the face of political interference. Furthermore, the study enhances governance theories by highlighting the significance of policies,

regulatory bodies, and leadership development in promoting ethical cultures in HEIs in Zimbabwe and beyond. It also offers a sophisticated viewpoint on the ethical conflicts between institutional authority and academic autonomy, enhancing discussions on higher education governance.

### 5.3 Practical Implications

The study provides practical recommendations for university leadership to develop explicit policies that reconcile academic freedom with institutional integrity. It emphasizes the necessity for ongoing ethical training for university leadership, assuring their preparedness to address ethical challenges proficiently. The study also advocates for transparent conflict resolution procedures, offering a framework for equitable and consistent dispute management. It further emphasizes the significance of autonomous monitoring bodies in guaranteeing ethical governance and decision-making. The results advocate for cultivating a culture of transparent communication between academics and leadership, hence enhancing trust and inclusivity within organisations. The study, therefore, reconciles theory and practice by offering an evidence-based framework for ethical leadership in higher education institutions, safeguarding academic freedom while upholding institutional integrity.

### 5.4 Proposed Areas for Further Research

Potential areas for further research include examining how different ethical leadership models influence the balance between academic freedom and institutional reputation. Additionally, investigating the role of organisational culture in shaping ethical decision-making within universities is crucial. Cross-cultural comparative studies of ethical leadership in HEIs across different regions or governance systems would also provide valuable insights. Similarly, case studies of universities that have faced high-

profile ethical dilemmas related to academic freedom and reputation management could offer practical lessons on navigating such challenges. Further research could also explore the role of religious universities in shaping ethical leadership practices, as their governance structures and value systems may differ from secular institutions. Finally, ethical challenges in online learning environments, including the complexities of academic freedom in virtual classrooms, present a critical area for study, particularly in understanding how universities can uphold ethical standards in digital education.

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